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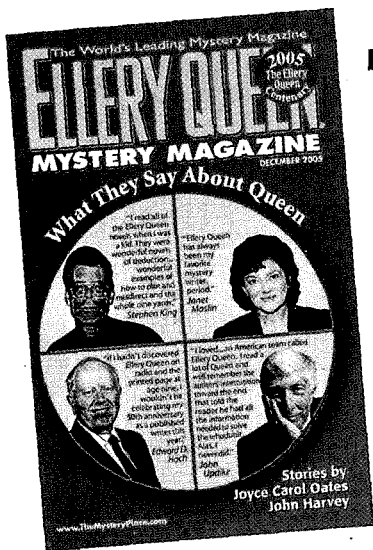


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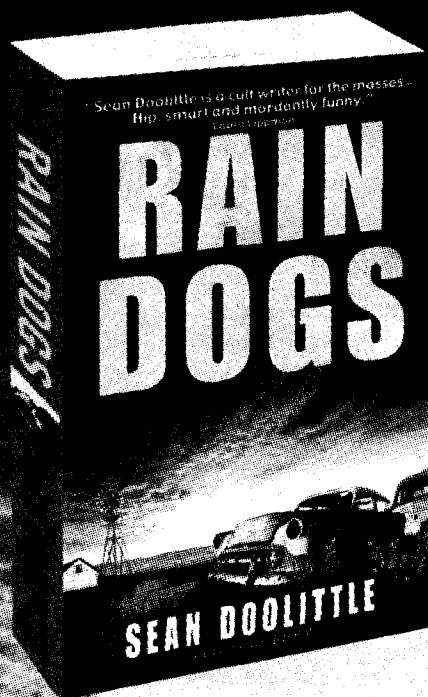


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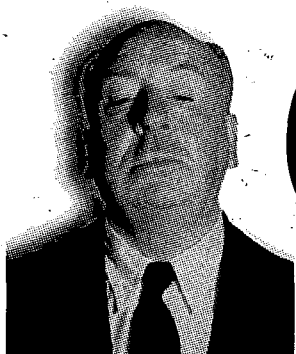
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

WINTER GOTHIC

This month's issue features a variety of pursuits suitable to the winter months: art, performance, indoor athletics—and of course, murder.

Elaine Menge is the master of a deliciously creepy style of suburban gothic, and we are delighted to feature her new story, "Perpetual Care," on our cover this month. Alan Gordon's sleuthing fool Feste returns in "The Jester and the Captain," set in thirteenth-century Constantinople, while Diana Deverell takes FBI agent Dawna Shepherd on a tour of Mongolia with the USA junior women's basketball team in "Mongol Mash." D. H. Reddall's Cape Cod P.I. Stubblefield investigates the death of an artist in "Red Shift." An aging mob enforcer picks at an old scab in Jas. R. Petrin's "Juice." And while lawyers have a rep for being crafty, Vicky Woodward's housewife/attorney in "Gifted" is that and more.

Making her AHMM debut is the Edgar Award-winning writer G. Miki Hayden, whose "Murder on 123rd Street" delves into the world of contemporary immigrants to the United States from Africa. Among Ms. Hayden's novels are the humorous mystery *By Reason of Insanity* (Free Range Press, 1998) and the futuristic *New Pacific* (Silver Lake, 2004). She lives in New York City.

We continue our year-long celebration of the magazine's fiftieth anniversary with another classic story drawn from AHMM's own pages. This month we feature Robert Bloch's take on life's ups and downs in "Luck Is No Lady."

Correction: Our October Unsolved puzzle contained a small error, but one that unfortunately had big consequences for its resolution. With the corrected text in bold, Clue 14 should read: "Helga's cabin is somewhere east of the lady who toured Acadia National Park and the third west of the journalist's wife (**who isn't married to James**).” The final paragraph should read: "As the guilty duo was led away in handcuffs, **Edward** turned to Mr. Timmons and said, 'How tragic! If _____ had only told us about his financial difficulties, we could have loaned him the money. But I suppose he was too embarrassed to ask.' "

MONGOL MASH

DIANA DEVERELL

Standing on the platform, last stop before the border, FBI Special Agent Dawna Shepherd focused on her surveillance target, but not so intently that she ignored her other traveling companions. Two men had tracked her every move during the thirty-seven hours since she'd boarded the Trans-Mongolian railway. A comparatively affluent Western woman who was not part of a tour group, Dawna knew she appeared to them to be their perfect victim. And now she felt them closing in.

Protectively, she patted the left front pocket of her fisherman's vest and edged to the front of the passengers gathered on the broad pavement separating the tracks from the Russian border outpost and station buildings. Beyond the crowd, the fenced pavement gave way to a parched and unpeopled plain that stretched to the horizon. Dawna shoved damp frizz off her moist forehead, her crisp blond curls flattened by the heat. The only trees were fifty yards farther along the platform. Yet passengers lingered under the relentless afternoon sun, watching a dozen well-coordinated Amazons tossing balls to one another. The touring USA women's junior basketball team was using the lengthy stop to run a pass and block drill. Top players, they represented eleven different colleges and had been a team for only one month. Dawna was impressed by their choreography, the synchronization they'd achieved.

Forward Alyssa Norgaard was moving to the center of the dance and Dawna stretched on her tiptoes to track her rangy subject. Alyssa and her teammates were as tall as Dawna, six-foot-three, but even without her usual height advantage, she easily spotted the trademark reddish ponytail. Alyssa wrestled the ball away from Jerrie Justin, whose dimpled cheeks were red with exertion below her ebony brush cut. Alyssa's ponytail flared out above them, a proud strawberry blond banner.

Dawna spotted Lupe Navarro on the sidelines. She was the team's coach and Dawna's former roommate from their days as college players at the University of Texas. Lupe was the reason the FBI agent had traveled undercover across Siberia.



Tim Foley

The coach yelled a command and the workout tempo ratcheted up. Dawna heard Alyssa grunt as she grabbed for the ball, saw sweat shining on her pale face, felt her own T-shirt growing moist.

Suddenly, a choked groan came from the crush of female bodies. Dawna concentrated on sorting out arms and legs in the play that had gone down. But the pair of Mongolian men tracking her had chosen this moment to run their own play, she realized, as a body smashed into her right hip.

The shorter and stockier descendant of Genghis Khan—she'd labeled him "Smokes" because he always had a cigarette pack in his hand—had slammed her on the right. No surprise that equally sturdy "Beer"—a lover of Baltika in tall cans—was in position on her left to fake breaking her fall as he slid grasping fingers into that front vest pocket where she'd lured him.

He ended up kissing the pavement, one arm jerked up behind his back, Dawna's knee pinning his lower spine. She recognized the classic pocket-picking maneuver and glanced up to confirm that his partner had disappeared. Smokes was no longer a threat. Her tension eased.

"Leave me alone," she said to her captive. "Or I will break your arm." She twitched the limb higher by way of translation.

He let out a defeated moan.

Satisfied, she released him. She watched him take off toward the tail end of the train.

"May I help you?" a male voice asked, the question laden with the polite diffidence of the world traveler.

Dawna turned to face Magnus, the thirty-year-old Norwegian backpacker who had the fourth bunk in the railway compartment she shared with Alyssa and Jerrie. He was as tall as she, but bonier, with sparse, mud-colored hair. His faintly tanned skin was one shade lighter than his dusty boots and faded trekking shorts. He peered at her through black-framed spectacles. "Do you want me to find a policeman?"

"No, thanks." Dawna didn't want to draw more attention to herself. Her FBI job was a secret from all but two others riding the train. "No harm done," she added.

"Unfortunately, we cannot say the same of our bunkmate," Magnus said, tilting his head toward the silent ballplayers. "Alyssa should have a doctor attend to that cut."

Dawna followed his gesture toward the team crouched around a fallen Alyssa. Dark-eyed Lupè met Dawna's gaze for an instant. She turned back to Alyssa and pressed surgical gauze against the ballplayer's temple. Below the patch, blood streaked her bleached cheeks, dotted her workout jersey.

"What happened?" Dawna asked Magnus.

He shrugged. "One minute she was playing ball, the next minute she was on the ground, bleeding."

Precisely the move Dawna had been looking for. And she'd missed it.

"Damn," she muttered. "You see who hit her?"

Magnus shook his head. "I was watching the Mongolians. That pair tracking you, they remind me of sheepdogs, the way they operate in a crowd. They seem to know where one will be next, before one knows it oneself. Must be instinctive—not likely all these so-called traders are straight off the steppes, taking a break from herding their flocks. But they have that same amazing talent for observing, predicting, and altering animal behavior." He eyed Dawna curiously. "Although they seem to have misjudged you."

Dawna stared pointedly at her wristwatch. "Better get some grub." She cast a quick glance at Lupe. The coach clearly needed no immediate help from her. Trotting quickly, she led Magnus toward the far end of the platform where a group of local vendors huddled beneath the meager shade. They poked busy hands through the fence, selling barbecue sandwiches and cold drinks to the passengers. The heat and dust mixed with bartering voices and the smell of charcoal and grilling meat, giving Dawna an off-kilter reminder of her West Texas birthplace—ranch lingo with an Asian accent.

She stayed a few steps ahead of Magnus, evading his implicit question, What are you doing here?

She imagined his brow wrinkling in puzzlement if she explained. Basketball was the key and the Norwegian knew nothing about the sport. Because of basketball, she and Lupe had been friends for more than fifteen years, ever since that golden season when the Lady Longhorns ruled the Big Dance.

Still in the game, Lupe was building a dynamite women's team at a scrappy California school. This summer, she'd taken time out to coach the U.S. junior team. At exhibition games en route to Mongolia, her powerhouse women had trounced clubs in Kiev and Tblisi.

But trouble began at the Astana, Kazakhstan game. In a tough match against a well-prepared national team, the American women were lucky to play to a draw after Alyssa was sidelined by concussion early in the second half. In the hotel that night, a shaky Alyssa showed Lupe old warning messages in her e-mail and admitted that threatening calls had come in on her cell phone. Someone was trying to throw her off her game—and not only mentally. Lupe recalled that the concussion had been preceded by

some hard knocks in practice—all deemed accidental, but were they? Frightened for Alyssa and worried about the upcoming world championship game in Ulan Bator, Lupe called Dawna in Budapest, asking for help.

Although Dawna'd been tempted by an offer to play pro ball after college, it was the competing bid from the FBI she accepted. She'd pulled two overseas tours assigned to U.S. embassies in Europe, and was on her third stint as an instructor at Quantico East, the FBI-run International Law Enforcement Academy in Budapest.

Lucky for Lupe that Hungary was relatively near Kazakhstan because an off-duty cop was what she needed. Lupe couldn't identify any player who would gain by disabling a teammate. The other women came from entirely different schools, so no intra-team rivalry explained it. And the twelve athletes represented eleven separate leagues from the Atlantic Coast Conference to the PAC-10, so next season's standings weren't a consideration. But this tournament was. Alyssa was a menace on the boards, the key to winning in Ulan Bator—and everyone wanted to win.

On the other hand, maybe Lupe's star player was off her game and faking the threats to explain away damage caused by her own mistakes. Lupe had to coach the team; she couldn't watch Alyssa every minute, trying to keep her from getting hurt or hurting herself. But Dawna could. A little quiet bird-dogging, and in return, Lupe promised, she'd get the vacation of a lifetime.

This unlikely tour to the Far East was made "educational" for the players by inclusion of a scenic ride on the famous railway line linking Moscow and Beijing. The team would make an easy connection north from Kazakhstan to a regular stop in Russia. They'd relax crossing Siberia, arrive in Mongolia rested and ready to play.

All Dawna had to do was take a week's leave, fly to Novosibirsk, and board there. Riding along as Lupe's basketball-loving college buddy, she'd share space with Alyssa and another player, and only Lupe would know she was also a federal agent.

Dawna'd had two days to get her Russian and Mongolian visas and do her homework on the ballplayers.

And a fat lot of good that research had done her, she thought, as she and Magnus traded rubles at the fence for lamb-scented sandwiches smothered in ketchup and raw onions. She stepped toward the train as she bit into the stringy meat. She had no idea who was tormenting Alyssa. She had to get back to her charge, who was at least a half mile away at the tail end of the string of antiquated railway carriages.

"The traders are getting back on board." Magnus fueled Dawna's sense of urgency.

Clutching her sandwich, she dashed after Magnus. He reached the first sleeper car as the train began to move. He reached down from the steps and helped haul her aboard.

Here, at the end of the train closest to the locomotive, were the more expensive compartments, each with only two bunks, all reserved months in advance by organized tours from Frankfurt and London. Even these cars were utilitarian, not the cinematic luxury Dawna had imagined.

With no room available in so-called "soft" class, Dawna and Lupe's group were consigned to the other end of the train, in "hard" class, with four bunks to a compartment. Magnus was the only other Westerner who had ended up at the cheaper and more crowded end of the train, and the authorities had apparently considered his national origin more important than his gender, tucking him into the free spot in Dawna's compartment. The rest of the hard class bunks were filled by Mongolian merchants, who spent their summers circling between Moscow and Ulan Bator, selling everything from Armani knockoffs to air freshener at the whistle stops between.

Chewing diligently, Dawna led the way back through the first eight cars, past nicely dressed and well-fed Westerners who'd congregated at the windows, enjoying their last view of Russia. As she squeezed hurriedly by them, Magnus followed with murmured apologies in German and English. To progress from carriage to carriage, Dawna had to open heavy doors at the ends of each car, scrambling across tilting and shifting plates on the gangways.

The scent of highly spiced noodles greeted her entry into the cheaper section. With boiling water available from built-in wood-heated samovars, instant soup was the cuisine of choice for the budget traveler.

"Where'd the dining car disappear to?" Dawna asked Magnus. She'd missed it in the middle of the string of cars, separating soft from hard class.

"They disconnect it in Russia," he said. "And the Russian kitchen crew goes with it."

"No loss," Dawna sniffed. The two times she'd tried to buy a meal, all seats had been taken by the tours, whose members lingered long over their meals. Dawna'd found it simpler to buy food from the locals who showed up at scheduled stops. She'd chosen carefully. So far, no strange bacilli had attacked from her thoroughly cooked purchases.

Ahead of her, the corridor was crowded with male and female

Mongolians frenetically rearranging their bundles of trade goods. Magnus stopped to try out his Russian on the attractive young stewardess, the *provodnitsa*, working in this carriage.

Dawna moved along as quickly as she could, pausing only to greet the saleswoman who bunked in the compartment next to hers. The vendor had moved her action one car forward in the train, and her goods blocked the aisle as she refolded her one hundred percent polyester turtlenecks around cartons of cigarettes before stowing them in a zippered carryall. Jammed behind the handrail next to her was a biscuit-colored female torso with gently rounded breasts and a fashionably flat stomach. A stick ran down its spine and for another yard below the truncated thighs. The turtleneck saleslady used the partial mannequin during stops to display her fluorescent-toned wares.

She was dressed as usual to outshine the shirts. Her eye-catching frock was decorated with tropical birds and jungle foliage, and she'd covered her jet black hair with a baseball cap the color of tangerines. She grinned at Dawna and held up her hand, forming a circle with thumb and forefinger. "Okay," she said, the only English word Dawna had ever heard from her mouth. Dawna guessed the approval was for her handling of the pickpockets.

She smiled in reply and eased her way through the clutter, continuing to the end of the car, the next-to-the-last of the train. Glancing through the open doors to the compartments, she observed that the double-tiered bunks and under-the-window tables had disappeared beneath piles of clothing, boxes, and packages as the vendors engaged in the hectic rearrangement of their goods that had been going on since the Russian customs officials had left the train.

By contrast, in the last three compartments, immobile athletes sprawled over the bunks, their long legs and size thirteen feet filling the airspace. The only movement came from characters in a movie that baby-faced Ndidi Ngali was watching on her laptop. Ten players, the coach, and the trainer occupied three compartments in this carriage. Lupe had put Alyssa in the next car, sharing the compartment with Dawna and, coincidentally, the innocuous Magnus. Jerrie Justin had the fourth bunk because Alyssa told Lupe that she felt safest with Jerrie.

The sweet-faced young woman did have a reassuring appearance, Dawna realized, as she came face-to-face with her. A result, she decided, of the deep dimple in each cheek and eyes that disappeared when she smiled. With her short spiky hair, Jerrie was a cherub, size XXL. She stood beyond the gangway, waiting outside the closet with a metal sink and primitive Western-style commode

that was shared by thirty-two travelers. The matching toilet at the opposite end had been commandeered for exclusive use by the two hefty *provodnitsas* serving their car. Jerrie nodded toward the door marked WC. "Last chance before customs," she said.

"Can't pass that up." Dawna fell into line. Seconds later, Beer came through the gangway door behind her, his arms wrapped around a large cardboard box. He treated Dawna as though she weren't there. She crowded closer to Jerrie to avoid being scraped by the box. She smelled rank, unwashed male, superseded by Jerrie's lighter scent, girl-sweat tinged with lavender soap.

Alyssa emerged from the toilet with a damp towel over her shoulder, her face scrubbed clean of blood. She handed a roll of paper to Jerrie, who went in.

"You check out that squat toilet at the station?" Alyssa asked. When Dawna shook her head, Alyssa faked a shudder and added, "Okay for Magnus, maybe."

Dawna studied the girl. Handsome rather than pretty, her firm jaw line complemented her broad shoulders. She radiated strength. Not a woman given to baseless squeamishness. Or groundless fear. If Alyssa saw problems, they were real ones. Dawna gestured at her bandaged temple. "I got distracted right when it went down. How'd you get hurt?"

"Caught an elbow. Just like before."

Two weeks before, Dawna knew. An earlier "accident." The healing wound, still vivid, was the ideal target for someone who wanted to draw blood. "Last time I looked, you were fighting Jerrie for the ball," she said speculatively.

"For sure it wasn't Jerrie's elbow. I was watching her set a screen ten feet away from me." Alyssa made a face. "Worst thing is, I didn't get a chance to buy anything to eat. There's no dining car. I may starve to death."

Dawna laughed. Alyssa's appetite was legendary. "I think you can last a few hours."

"Easy for you to say, you've eaten—I can smell the onions." Alyssa ambled toward their compartment.

The toilet decanted Jerrie, who passed the roll of paper to Dawna before strolling after Alyssa.

But their relaxed postures had vanished when Dawna joined them a minute later. She found the women crowded together on Alyssa's lower berth, staring at Dawna's bunk. On it lay the naked and headless torso used by the turtleneck saleslady. The wooden handle of a paring knife sprouted from its stomach.

"Migod," Alyssa whispered. Swallowing, she tried again. "You think—"

"Calm down," Dawna interrupted. She yanked out the knife and returned it to the empty fruit bowl on the table below the window. She shoved the headless torso under a pair of pillows. "The body was in my bunk. The message is for me, not you."

"Yes," Magnus said from the doorway. He swung up into his berth, above Dawna's. "That fellow, he had to show he doesn't fear you. Now it is over."

"Right," Dawna said tersely, surprised by the sudden appearance of Magnus—and by his ready agreement. She wasn't certain the message was for her. But she wanted to calm Alyssa and she was glad to have help. She added, "He won't try anything more."

"Who?" Alyssa was asking. "What are you talking about?"

Dawna sat beside her and quickly recounted events.

"So what will you do?" Jerrie asked.

"Watch my back," she said. "Both of you should, too. Just to be on the safe side. But I doubt he'll take it any further."

Nodding agreement, Magnus peered down at the women, his legs dangling in the air in front of them. "Despite what you may have read about the Mongol hordes, violent crime is not typical of the modern Mongolian," he said.

Alyssa and Jerrie exchanged long-suffering glances. They'd learned that the Scandinavian loved to lecture. Unfortunately, his version of English didn't emphasize any words. His voice was as washed out as his appearance, fading to beige at the end of every sentence.

Dawna glanced out the window beside her. A breeze came through the open top half and she caught a whiff of green plants. She spotted a line of trees on the horizon, likely marking a distant riverbed.

She heard Magnus saying, "The Mongolian Empire spread from Korea to Hungary, making it the largest the world has known. Of course it shrank considerably, but the people have remained nomadic at heart. While only thirty percent of the population lives out on the steppes with their animals, we can see how the others have adapted the same skills to the modern world."

He paused for breath. Alyssa stirred restlessly and Jerrie cleared her throat, as though about to change the subject.

The compartment door rattled, jarred by a passerby. Dawna saw a swirl of sundress printed with parrots and toucans and the turtle-neck saleslady's orange cap. Beside her was a second dark-haired young woman wearing stiletto heels, skin-tight designer jeans, and a camisole baring the tops of her breasts and her midriff. Both women grinned as they peeked into the compartment.

Camisole said something, Turtle-neck replied, and both laughed,

their giggles still audible after they moved out of view and into the next compartment. Clearly, Dawna's rep was growing. Given Turtleneck's friendly demeanor, she guessed that the laughter was at Beer. She realized that Turtleneck had given no indication that she expected to find her mannequin in the compartment. Dawna remembered the box scraping past her and Jerrie. A box large enough to hold the headless torso. And Beer'd had enough time to fling it onto her bunk and drive a knife through its gizzard.

Alyssa pulled the door shut. "Some adaptation." She tossed Magnus's word back to him. "What, you think they stare at us like that because they believe we're a new herd animal?"

"Of course you ballplayers appear strange and exotic to them," Magnus said. "But you'll notice that they watch everything going on around them. Being observant is the key to survival in the wild."

Alyssa shook her head. "I don't care what their reasons are. I don't like being watched all the time. Makes me feel like I'm traveling with a trainload of referees."

"Or cops," Jerrie added.

"More like crooks." Dawna waved a hand toward the corridor. "They don't look even slightly law-abiding to me."

Magnus shrugged. "A different set of rules applied in the culture they come from. Smuggling was a way of life. Although stealing someone's horse was a capital offense." He inhaled, sucking in enough air for a very long sentence.

"And speaking of horses," Alyssa interjected quickly, pulling a DVD from her pocket, "I traded one of my spare battery packs to Ndidi for this. Who wants to watch *Seabiscuit*?" She lifted her lap-top down from the upper bunk.

"I'll stick with my book," Magnus said. He drew his long legs up into the bunk. Moving aside a pile of printouts from Internet travel sites, he positioned himself against his backpack and opened a battered copy of *The Secret History of the Mongols*.

Jerrie winced and patted her stomach. "And I'm feeling like I need to lie down." She hoisted herself onto the bunk above Alyssa. "Saw most of that flick yesterday. Missed the ending when Ndidi's battery died. You sure you have enough power left for the whole thing?"

Alyssa was fiddling with the DVD drive. "Looked okay when I booted up this morning in Irkutsk."

Where Dawna knew she'd downloaded another threatening e-mail.

Pretending to be asleep in the lower bunk across from Alyssa, Dawna had watched Alyssa's face as she read it. Magnus was on

the platform buying dried fish and Jerrie was down the corridor using her cell phone. Believing herself unobserved, Alyssa had no reason to fake the fear Dawna read on her face. It was genuine.

Dawna had immediately revised her game plan. She got Alyssa's attention and explained why she was traveling with the team. Glad to have the FBI on her side, Alyssa showed her the e-mail message. As in all the previous ones, the sender had used an online account to hide the true source. The only other player with a laptop was Ndidi, but she and Alyssa were generous. Any of the others could have sent an e-mail.

But several hours later, Dawna still hadn't figured out who had done it. Eventually, computer experts at the bureau could identify the culprit, but she didn't like the delay. Pondering, she stared at the passing scenery, which now included small saplings and bushes, a haze of green over the flatland.

No one could have sent Alyssa a message from Irkutsk where they'd been this morning, she realized. Only Alyssa's laptop had power and only Alyssa had used it during the stop. Could another user have rigged an online Outbox to send a pre-entered message automatically when the connection was made? And if she had, would it have ended up instantaneously in Alyssa's Inbox? Dawna didn't know. And she still couldn't guess a motive.

Initially, Dawna'd ruled out gambling as an explanation. No Western betting shop had a line on the World Championships. Of course, Asians were notorious bettors, but she'd assumed no Far East gambling syndicate would target Alyssa to alter the final scores in Ulan Bator.

After finding the headless torso in her bunk, she was having second thoughts. The pickpocketing attempt had distracted her at the crucial moment. Were Beer and Smokes part of a complex plot against Alyssa?

She turned away from the window as the young woman looked up from her laptop. "You want to watch?" she asked.

"No," Dawna said. "Let's talk. What was it you were saying yesterday, about why this tournament is in Ulan Bator?"

"I heard the U.B. group made an unbeatable bid," Alyssa said. "Women's basketball is way big over here. A ticket costs like eighty bucks. Every game sells out. They're expecting a lot of Chinese fans—"

Dawna interrupted, impatient. "No, what was it you said, about wanting to get famous this trip?"

"Get a little name recognition," Alyssa corrected. "Case I need to look for a job in China. There aren't enough pro spots in the U.S.

for everyone who's good. Like the post player who graduated from my school four years ago. She had a fantastic senior year, which is critical, you've got no chance in the draft without that. Portland Fire took her in the first round. But when the franchise folded, her only options were overseas. So she's playing in China, making decent money."

Air brakes hissed and the train slowed. Looking like a Russian commissar, one of their well-padded *provodnitsas* tromped down the corridor, shooing everyone into compartments, collecting passports, shutting the compartment doors.

"Border crossing." Magnus peered out the window. "Customs officials are waiting for us."

Dawna followed his gaze. Beyond the platform sat a broad two-story sandstone building fronted by a wide stone staircase. To the left of the building stood a grove of trees, shading a couple of government vehicles parked haphazardly beside the stairs. A half dozen uniformed men and women clustered on the platform, and several more were scattered across the staircase.

The compartment door rattled open to reveal Ndidi. She and Jerrie were teammates at Fordham and also best friends. Ndidi had the long-muscled and lightly fleshed body of a Kenyan long-distance runner, but her face was incongruously rounded, its pudginess accented by a frame of wavy hair styled like Oprah Winfrey's.

The new arrival spoke to Alyssa and Jerrie. "Coach has all our documents, you have to be with us."

"But last time—" Alyssa began.

Ndidi interrupted. "Different country, different rules. Come on."

"What, all of us have to squeeze into Coach's place?" Jerrie slipped from her bunk to the floor.

"Just the same car, dummy. You two can hang out with me." Ndidi held up a hand, palm outward, to discourage the *provodnitsa* hurrying toward her. "I know, I know, stay in the compartment." She turned back to Jerrie. "Hurry up, we saved you guys some of these ravioli thingies we bought, they're still warm."

Jerrie gathered up her water bottle and looked from Alyssa to Dawna and back again. "You coming or not?" she asked. Her too-casual tone and blank expression told Dawna that Alyssa had confided in Jerrie. Which meant Jerrie also knew that Dawna was FBI, here to protect Alyssa.

Alyssa didn't look up, fiddling with her computer. "Just got to put this thing on standby."

"I'll save you a snack," Jerrie said as she trailed after Ndidi.

The two women had the sweetest faces on the team, yet Dawna

didn't like Alyssa leaving with them. She didn't want her out of sight. But she had no choice. "You stay close to the coach," she said.

"I'll be fine with Ndidi and Jerrie," Alyssa said, folding up the laptop and standing. "I mean, Jerrie, she's practically family. Her big sister Julie is a senior on my team. We play the same position."

"Her sister," Dawna began. She was so startled she had to take a breath. "But there are no Justins—"

Alyssa cut her off. "Julie, Giulietta Giustina, she uses the old-world spelling for her name, really into the ethnic thing. We tried to recruit Jerrie too. But she decided to stay back East, so she could be with Ndidi." Alyssa was through the door, pulling it shut.

Dawna jumped to her feet and yanked the door open. She had to get Alyssa away from her oh-so-innocent-looking companions. A cabal of Asian gamblers wasn't behind the assaults on Alyssa. No, the culprit was another ballplayer with more ambition than sense.

But Dawna's exit was barred by the *provodnitsa*. Dawna raised a hand to push the chunky woman aside. She stopped herself when she spotted the border guard with a slung rifle, blocking the gangway to the next car. Dawna glared, mentally cursing the woman in front of her. Alyssa was in real danger, but Dawna had no way to warn her.

The *provodnitsa* tapped Dawna's chest, moving her a step back. The slamming door brushed her nose.

She dashed to the window and stuck her head through the opening. She couldn't see up the track into the next carriage, only across to the half dozen armed guards lining the platform. The one in front of her gestured with his rifle. Raise the window, his meaning was clear. He permitted only a three-inch crack at the top. She couldn't lean out and yell to Lupe.

The door slid open. A five and a half foot-tall Mongolian male leaned in, waving a pair of passports. Dawna took in the uniform and the official badge. Time to play her FBI card. She reached into the money belt she wore beneath her T-shirt and pulled out her shield. "I am an agent of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation," she began.

The short man stared, uncomprehending.

Magnus intervened, translating her words into Russian, the second language of most adult Mongolians.

"Tell him I have official business in the next carriage," Dawna said quickly.

But five words into Magnus's translation, the officer was shaking his head *no*, tapping a finger on Dawna's passport, making an

emphatic statement.

"Tourist passport, tourist visa," Magnus said. "He doesn't care how you earn your living, you are here as a tourist and he will treat you as one."

The officer pressed the passport into her hand. "Very sorry," he said, stepping out of the compartment and shutting the door.

"I have to get to Alyssa." Dawna dashed back to the window, frantically scanning the scene outside. Camisole was mincing her way up the steps of the customs building, a bundle of papers clutched in her hand. "The traders," Dawna said, "they're allowed off."

"That's true," Magnus began. "But they must take their import documents—"

But Dawna had the door open. She stuck her head into the corridor.

A head popped out of the adjacent compartment. Turtleneck.

Dawna beckoned Magnus over and pointed toward the woman next door. "I need her dress and hat. Ask her to lend me them."

After a swift exchange, she heard Turtleneck's "Okay."

Dropping her vest on the bunk, she started pulling her T-shirt over her head.

"There are conditions," Magnus added hurriedly. "You must say that you forced her to give you her things."

"Fine," Dawna agreed, unsnapping her shorts, letting them fall to the floor.

"And she wants us to take some cigarette cartons in our duty-free import allowance."

Bending the law to save Alyssa, not a moral dilemma. "Get the dress," Dawna demanded, stripping to bra, panties, and money belt.

Seconds later, Magnus handed the clothing into the compartment. He shut the door as Dawna pulled the sundress over her head. The gaudy fabric went smoothly around her slender figure, but lengthwise it ended in the middle of her rump. She reached behind her neck and loosened the halter knot, tugging the dress lower on her body. It covered her backside, but the revised neckline plunged a centimeter below the top of her bra. She jammed her hair under the cap.

Magnus stared at her, his forehead wrinkled. "I don't know—" he began.

"Not a perfect cover. But it only has to get me off the train." Dawna snatched the pile of printouts from Magnus's bunk and stuffed them into the crook of her left arm. She grabbed the stick end of the headless torso.

Magnus opened the compartment door and Dawna blazed through, moving fast past the *provodnitsas* and down the steps to

the platform. She turned right, heading for the adjoining car. A male voice shouted a question. Dawna ignored him. She strode the length of her own carriage toward the window of Ndidi's compartment in the next.

A second, shriller voice yelled. Dawna faked a stumble, tossing the papers forward so they fell to the platform beneath Ndidi's window. A breeze caught the brim of her cap, loosening its hold on her skull. She knew blond hair was escaping. She bent over the papers, flashing what she hoped was a distracting view of her underwear.

A man in civilian clothes materialized from the shade beneath a tree.

Beer.

Recognition dawned on him and his appreciative look gave way to bewilderment. Probably surprised that the American lady was working a scam of her own.

Smokes joined him. The two narrowed their eyes and stared hard at Dawna.

She couldn't give them time to get in her way. She pulled herself to her full height. The headless torso slammed against Ndidi's window. One naked breast went from convex to concave. "Alyssa!" she cried. "Alyssa!"

The girl's bandaged face appeared at the window.

"Poison," Dawna yelled. She was gambling that was the most likely weapon Jerrie would use against Alyssa. Three other ballplayers shared the compartment with Ndidi. She and Jerrie wouldn't dare cripple Alyssa with witnesses looking on. But they could try to make her violently ill. They'd had their pick of pollutants at the last stop. "Don't eat or drink a thing," she added. "And be careful."

Another whistle blew. An armed guard and two customs officials surrounded her, talking loudly and harshly in at least two languages. She heard loud guffaws. Glancing past the officials, she saw Beer slap Smokes on his back. Two happy men, watching the cops bust their nemesis.

The officials marched her back to her own carriage and shoved her into her compartment, tossing the mannequin in too.

Through the closed door, she heard the high-pitched tones of a woman's voice. Turtleneck trying out her story of being forced to help Dawna.

Magnus sat on a lower berth beside the window, eight cartons of cigarettes neatly arranged on his lap. "I saw you give your warning," he said.

"Thanks for helping me out."

He waved a hand dismissively. "I understood you were concerned for Alyssa."

Dawna glanced at the stabbed and battered torso. Headless and armless, it lay lifelessly on Alyssa's bunk, seeming to blame her for taking so long to figure out where danger lay. "I hope I wasn't too late."

Magnus wrinkled his brow. "Why do you believe Alyssa is not safe with Jerrie and her friend?"

"You heard, Jerrie has a sister, plays on the same college team as Alyssa." Dawna began changing back into her shorts and T-shirt. "For her, this Giulietta Giustina, this Julie, in order to have a future in professional basketball, she has to star during her last college season. And she's afraid that Alyssa will outshine her."

Magnus's frown intensified. "You cannot seriously believe this other player would harm Alyssa to stop her from playing during the next season?"

"Of course she would." Dawna stared out the window, trying to guess what was happening in the next car. She saw a beaming Camisole returning to the train. Beer and Smokes had vanished. But nothing else outside had changed. She glanced at Magnus, who still looked puzzled. She was distracted, worrying about Alyssa. But she owed him an explanation. She added, "Julie wants Alyssa sitting on the bench. She wants the court to herself."

"Surely her coach understands—"

Dawna interrupted. "The coach has to win games. Her job depends on it. She'll use Alyssa if that's what it takes to win. No, Julie can't count on the coach helping her." She hastily described the threatening messages Alyssa had received. Closed up, the compartment was getting warmer, taking on the smell of their none-too-clean bodies mingled with ancient food aromas trapped in the upholstery.

"I see," said Magnus slowly. "You believe this Julie sent the e-mail messages and made the phone calls?"

"She wanted to rattle Alyssa. Make her mistake prone. She recruited her little sister to increase the pressure. Take advantage of errors to do some actual damage." Dawna fidgeted in her seat as she fit the last pieces into the puzzle. "Once Jerrie learned I was watching, she used Ndidi to confuse me. It was Ndidi who hurt Alyssa today."

She shook her water bottle impatiently. Dry. She was sweaty, thirsty, and trapped. She checked her watch. Fifteen minutes had passed. Was Alyssa all right?

"Ah, now I understand," Magnus said sagely. "What you are saying corresponds precisely with what I know of the FBI's modus operandi. You trust no one. All are likely to be guilty."

He was going into lecture mode. Dawna realized. She pressed

her face to the window. Outside the customs officials had disappeared and only a pair of guards remained. Faintly, she heard a wailing sound, far away.

"Tell me," Magnus was saying, "when did you stop suspecting me?"

She'd never started, Dawna admitted to herself. Magnus was the most harmless person she'd ever met. Suspecting him would have been a waste of her energy. But it wasn't likely he'd enjoy hearing her say that. She realized that the siren-like noise was growing louder. "That sound like a Mongolian emergency vehicle to you?" she asked.

Magnus shrugged. "But tell me," he began again.

Dawna cut him off with a wave of her hand toward the outdoors. "Look at that," she added.

A dilapidated van skidded to a stop beside the next carriage. Two men in medical white leaped out. Neither was more than five feet tall, and together they weighed less than three hundred pounds. They threw open the rear doors and pulled out a piece of canvas stretched between two wooden poles.

Carrying their primitive stretcher, the midget duo boarded the next car. Dawna rattled the compartment door open, the sound lost in the general clatter as other curious travelers emerged. Taking advantage of the general uproar, she hurried past the WC and crossed the gangway to the next carriage. The two grunting stretcher bearers blocked the corridor in front of her. They were struggling to lift their load. The poles bent beneath the weight of a large body smelling of vomit.

Dawna cursed. She hadn't reached Alyssa in time.

Giving up, the puny Mongolian paramedics began jabbering and pulling at their patient, clearly urging her to leave the train under her own power.

At least Alyssa was conscious. Dawna stepped forward to help. Bending over, she stared into a ghost-white face with deep dimples. Not Alyssa's face! The patient was Jerrie, she realized.

"Gonna be sick," Jerrie moaned, turning her head.

The paramedics shoved Dawna out of the way and helped Jerrie aim for a mop bucket. Dawna ended up standing beside a healthy Alyssa.

"Thanks for warning me," the ballplayer said. "I'm careful about the local food. But I was getting hungry enough to eat anything. Soon as you said poison, I realized how hard Jerrie'd been pushing me to try the stuff."

Dawna nodded. "Yeah, I've noticed in practice how she tends to telegraph her next move when she gets excited."

"Things kind of fell into place for me then. Especially after what you and I had just been talking about. Plus, Jerrie, she's not so good at keeping her eye on the ball. She was trying to show me how good the food was—"

"And she ate the piece intended for you."

Alyssa grinned. "She wasn't feeling too hot to start with. After she realized what she'd done, that was enough to make her barf. Probably wasn't that ravioli thing made her sick, more likely something she swallowed earlier. Half the game's psychological, isn't it?"

Dawna glanced into the compartment and spotted Lupe standing over a red-eyed Ndidi. The girl huddled in the corner of the bunk, her body gone boneless. Lupe glanced at Dawna, gave her a tight nod before turning back to Ndidi.

Dawna gestured toward the pair. "Jerrie's partner in crime say anything?"

"Wouldn't shut up for a while there." Alyssa grimaced. "Like you probably figured, Giuliana Giustina was behind it."

Dawna shrugged. "Shouldn't be too hard to prove. Experts can trace the e-mail and phone calls. You'll have to decide if you want to file a complaint for criminal threatening and assault."

"Probably I shouldn't have told Jerrie that you're a cop," Alyssa said. "But it worked out okay. Knowing you were watching put her off balance. She had to change the game plan. Made defense a little easier."

Dawna shook her head. "Damn last name threw me off." Still, the timing had been good enough because Alyssa took what Dawna gave her and ran with it.

She glanced toward the gangway and spotted Magnus. He smiled back at her and made an approving circle of thumb and forefinger. Dawna noted the self-satisfaction in his happy look. He was probably glad for more real-life examples to bolster his scholarly theories about the FBI and Mongolians.

She turned toward Alyssa to hide her chuckle from him. Magnus was one of the good guys, but he needed to broaden his scope. Later, she'd point out to him that Mongolian traders weren't the only nomads on the train. Ballplayers spend half their lives traveling to foreign sports facilities, playing strange teams. Girl can't adapt to alien territory, she won't survive in basketball. "You end up playing in China," she said to Alyssa, "you won't have a lot of problems."

"One, for sure." Alyssa shook her head. "Those squat toilets. They are so not big-girl friendly." 🐼

A MURDER ON 123RD STREET

G. MIKI HAYDEN

Despite the heat of the day, Miriam insisted that they shut and lock the apartment windows before setting out to join their husband Kofi at the Shabazz Harlem Market. She wasn't afraid of rain so much as neighborhood thieves and vandals—not that Miriam had ever been robbed or vandalized in the twenty-some years she had lived in this country.

Her co-wife, Nana, did as Miriam bid. Nana was a good girl. She was, in fact, a much better girl than Miriam expected her to be when Kofi had imported wife number two from their home country of Ghana.

Miriam wove sturdy, handsome, and practical baskets. Spreading out a colorful pink cloth on the ground, she sold them on her own, away from Kofi. When she'd first started weaving the palm fronds she miraculously bought right through the mail (and they invariably came!), she'd given the handiwork to her husband to display at his table. And had never gotten any profit in return. After a period of some years, she'd not only aged, but she'd become much shrewder in her approach to moneymaking—and her husband.

Outside, on this quiet street so near the hustle and bustle of Harlem's main thoroughfare, 125th Street, the situation was not as usual. Today, the commotion had arrived in front of their very building, where three police cars were haphazardly parked.

Miriam's biggest fault, perhaps, was her curiosity. She was well aware, of course, that undue inquisitiveness was a flaw and had, as a child, sometimes had her arm pulled or face slapped for her pesky prying. But the more she had been dissuaded from trying to find out everything going on around her, the more important those information gathering efforts had seemed to be.

Now, the sight of the police cars, though alarming on the one hand, on the other triggered in her a pressing need to know. Luckily, this was New York City in the United States of America,

and many of the residents here had the same inordinate desire that Miriam had to find out everything concerning other people's business. A number of those selfsame "Nosey Parkers" (as the British who had once ruled in Ghana called them) were standing around outside the apartment house this morning, trying to see what they could see.

Nana, though a good girl, was an oblivious one. Shopping bag filled with frond items in hand, she tried to slip off toward the market, and Miriam had to grab her by the arm to hold her back. "What's wrong?" asked Nana in Twi, their native tongue.

"Do you see nothing?" asked Miriam in surprise.

"Oh yes," answered Nana, as if waking from a dream. This was the signal, apparently, for her to desert Miriam and approach the best-looking man among those who milled around whispering.

Miriam shook her head. If you wanted information, you must surely ask another woman. So she asked her next-door neighbor of many years, whose name Miriam had never quite worked up the courage to ask. "Has there been an accident?" she wondered. "Or maybe a theft?" Wisely she had locked the windows.

"A murder," the neighbor responded, in a tone that Miriam couldn't interpret precisely—probably a combination of fascination and horror. "The Haitian super. *Our* super who lives in the basement. Mr. Pierre!"

Miriam recoiled to hear such a thing. She could picture the blood of a man she actually knew spilling across the cement walkway. Or had he been killed on his wooden floor? How she worked to protect her own floors from unsightly damage. Likely blood on wood never might be gotten out. Her mind went directly from murder to the conundrum of stain removal. She pitied the wife of the next super who worked in this property. Which brought her to the thought of the current wife and the man's young child. Where would they go? Who would care for them now? Terrible. Terrible.

Seeing Nana becoming a little too cheerful in the company of her newfound male companion, Miriam went and pulled the girl away. Her own role in controlling Nana's behavior sometimes confused her. What did she care if the pretty, fresh thing flirted and ran around, really? What difference if Nana was married to Miriam's own husband, Kofi? The girl was young—let her have some enjoyment. But men were . . . Well, everyone knew just exactly what men were. So Miriam wanted to protect Nana from that kind of trouble. How absurd. There was no protecting a woman from men's unsurprising appetites when those very predictable inclinations matched the woman's own.



That night, Miriam cooked a chicken stew for the three of them and for the new widow and her little girl downstairs. This was a very sad situation. And Miriam had just been about to ask Mr. Pierre to come up and look at the toilet, which ran so she had to jiggle the handle and sometimes remove the lid and pull out the chain when it got caught. Such a small thing, and the life of a man such a looming concern, yet the small thing still weighed on her mind.

She washed her face and told Nana to put on a more modest blouse for their condolence call. Kofi, who had just arrived home, wanted to know when his dinner would be set before him. Did the man never watch American television? Miriam smiled sweetly as if concerned for his hunger. He knew where the plates were. But she would not say such a thing and let him feel abused, so that before long everyone in the household would be upset.

Nana smiled too, but Miriam wondered what the girl's thoughts were. Nana seemed to tolerate their husband as one would a stick of furniture. If the furniture was in your path, you moved around it.

They went downstairs, Nana carrying the dish so that Miriam, older and heavier than the lithe girl, could hold onto the rail.

Miriam was relieved that they were not the only visitors bringing their sympathies. The tragedy was too big for only her and Nana to confront.

The chicken stew went into the refrigerator and Miriam spoke a few words to Mrs. Pierre to express her sorrow.

"Such a bad thing," said Nana then, vaguely, yet sincerely. But if Miriam had not stopped several times to talk to the super with Nana in tow, Miriam might have believed that the girl herself had never even met the dead man.

After a polite interval, the two women walked back out onto the concrete pavement in front of the apartment where the super's little girl, Isabelle, rode her bicycle to and fro. Miriam uttered a small sound of pity. What might Miriam say to the poor child? She had no idea what the now fatherless girl knew.

"Hello, darling innocent one," Miriam said. Nana looked pained and puzzled at the sudden appearance of the child.

"My papa's dead," Isabelle told them.

"Ah, I am so, so sorry, little one," Miriam answered, still at a loss.

"A man killed my papa," added the child.

Miriam stood stock still. Was the murder solved? "Did your mother tell you that?" she asked.

"No. I saw. A very tall black man," went on the little girl solemnly. "Do you think my papa will come back?"

"I think your papa will always send his love to you," Miriam said. She neither knew the real answer herself, nor knew how to bring the child some consolation.

She then paused to look at the young one directly and evaluate her emotional state. In a moment, Miriam put a gentle hand on the smooth brown skin of the sweet little trembling chin. "Did you tell the policemen what you saw?" she asked.

The little girl shook her head no.

Other neighbors came along with covered dishes, and Miriam and Nana had to step aside to let them pass. At that point, the new widow emerged to fetch the child inside. Miriam cast a sad look upon Mrs. Pierre. "If you want us to babysit," she offered.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Pierre. "I think I'm going to move away." She sounded embarrassed.

"Whatever is best," Miriam assured her. "But in the meantime . . ."

They left it at that, and Miriam and Nana went inside to trudge up the stairs.

Nana, not Miriam, stopped at the second floor landing to rest a moment. "Do you regret not having a child?" she asked Miriam without provocation, startling her.

"Well, of course," Miriam answered sharply. "It's a woman's duty." She put her foot on the first step of the next flight, but Nana's hand reached out and gripped her arm.

"I think I'm going to have a baby," said Miriam's co-wife.

Now Miriam was more than a little taken aback. She felt flummoxed. Her ears mustn't be hearing right, or she had stepped into some other woman's life. She'd misunderstood everything to a very, very great extent. As Nana had told it, she and Kofi had never . . . Well, Miriam tried to think of a polite English word . . . "Consummated" came to mind.

Suddenly the heat rose to her face and she felt faint. What a bad, bad woman Miriam must be. She hadn't experienced such a jarring impact at the horrendous passing of a fellow human as she did at this really rather commonplace news. "Kofi will be pleased," Miriam said tightly. She withdrew her foot from the step and plopped her whole self down on it instead. She wasn't sure if she could climb the stairs right away.

"Well, no," Nana disagreed, staring up at the hallway ceiling, perhaps to examine the patches of dirty white peeling paint. "He hasn't . . . we haven't . . . I told you we never did."

"Oh yes," concurred Miriam, as if she had forgotten that small disclosure. And why should she care? She and Kofi also never . . . what was a better English word? "So the child is . . ." She tried to think of who had fathered Nana's unborn baby, but the girl was

both constantly indiscreet and generally secretive. "... someone else's?"

"What must I do, Mama? My father will be very angry if I come back home."

As Miriam began to stand again, Nana reached down to lend a surprisingly capable arm. If Nana went home, Miriam would miss her. And the poor girl, what would become of her and of the child? "I'll think of something," Miriam said tersely. Four in such a small apartment! Terrible to think this way right now, but could Kofi become the next building super? She imagined the larger apartment in the basement with fewer steps home, plus tips for this and that small endeavor, which Kofi could earn. And poor Mr. Pierre not yet cold in the ground. Miriam herself should be taken out and shot.

The next morning Miriam baked yams for their breakfast and made extras for the widow and her child. Then before even eating, she headed for the door with her offering in hand but waved back Nana who rose to go with her. "Eat your breakfast," she said brusquely. Nana sank back next to Kofi, who was busy pouring molasses into his food.

Miriam hoped she wasn't too early and waking the woman, who must have slept pretty badly last night—but surely Mrs. Pierre had to rise in the early hours and tend to the child. Miriam's impression was that children got up early, no matter what—not a pleasant thought, considering she was soon to have a child in her own small family. Old age and babies would not mix well.

Outside the basement apartment, Miriam tapped lightly on the door and paused in hesitation, fearful of intruding on the woman's grief. The shade inside the window was partly up and Miriam peered in, squinting so she could see back into the depths of the apartment.

Mrs. Pierre stood in her slip, on her tiptoes. She was engaged in an embrace with a man. A tall, black man. A man who was very much alive and well. A man who was obviously not Mr. Pierre.

Miriam's heart pounded. As she had yesterday, she felt a little bit dizzy now. Clutching the outer wall of the building, she made her way quietly back up the metal stairs to the street. This was something she would never have expected. Ever. Not ever. Mrs. Pierre had a lover. And who yet knew *how* Mr. Pierre had died only the day before—or why?

Miriam returned to her own apartment with the yams. They were her penance for being such an old nosy parker. She would

have to eat the yams not only for breakfast, but for her lunch as well.

With so much on her mind, Miriam sat down to weave palm fronds for a while at the kitchen table. This relaxed her. As she wove, she naturally thought about the way of life she and Kofi had left behind in Ghana, and she thought how many of the religious rites and customs of their own land were similar to those practiced by people in other, unfamiliar places. Then she realized the reason the customs of the Haitians, say, were not unlike those in Africa. The ancestors of most of the people who lived in Haiti today had come from the African continent, too.

Miriam more or less recalled the map of the world from her school years and the history that her teachers had taught them. Even the religion of the Haitians, the Voudon, came directly from Africa.

Miriam was glad she had taken the time to do her quiet work, and as her fingers moved in the weaving, the Twi symbol for "except God" came to her mind. That's what she would put on the bottom of the basket, the *gye nyame*, a picture that meant: "The world goes on forever and ever. No one lives who saw its beginning and no one will live to see its end. Except God." And if Mrs. Pierre hadn't with her lover killed Mr. Pierre, Miriam would like to give the basket to her.

"You haven't forgotten what I told you the other day?" Nana asked, shifting her eyes from Miriam to the ground as the two wives walked up Malcolm X Boulevard.

"No," said Miriam. "I have something in mind . . ."

They both turned to look at the three women dressed in bright cotton cloth, as Miriam and Nana might have seen them among the Ashantis, in traditional African dress complete with matching head wrap. "So many women from home," murmured Nana.

"Yes," said Miriam. When she had first come here, more than two decades before, she had been a rarity, a woman from the homeland. Now she often heard their language in the street or the tones of languages she knew from the other countries of West Africa.

"Where are we going, Mama?" asked Nana as they crossed 125th Street.

"To the herbalist," answered Miriam. She meant to the Haitian priest she knew who ran an herb and juice shop around 128th.

"No, Mama, no," cried Nana in distress. "I don't want to kill the baby."

Miriam stared at the girl. What could she be imagining? "Of course not," said Miriam. "It's not for you. Never mind that. You'll have your baby."

"Truly, Mama? Truly? And I won't have to go home?" Nana's instant tears turned quickly to a smile.

The girl seemed the most warm and eager Miriam had seen her yet, less dunderheaded—more attached to the ground and to her surroundings. But why the girl wanted to stay, Miriam couldn't quite understand. What a dull life she had here with two old people who never left the house for entertainment. How Miriam herself would love to eat at a fine restaurant, for instance, or go one night into the famous theater on 125th Street to hear some music—something lively, perhaps, such as the drums.

Miriam had an unusual ability to get people to do what she wanted them to. She didn't understand it herself, nor did she really like or approve of what she did. Yet sometimes, like now, in an emergency, she used her striking powers of persuasion. So that was how she got the herbalist, or sorcerer, he might be, to accompany her later to the home of Mrs. Pierre. She had told him first that Mrs. Pierre needed the solace of a minister, then later revealed what her real suspicions were. Miriam knew the skills of these special people who trafficked in magic. Whether or not they had any genuine spiritual capacities, she wasn't sure. But she did know they could hold sway over the minds of those who believed in them. That was all she hoped for from the priest.

That evening, she brought the so-called *houngan* into Mrs. Pierre's home, not without a stab of real misgiving. She knew quite well that in the world of the religious, differences in type of practitioner abound, and that bad men present themselves as good and bring only nightmares to those who associate with them. But if Mrs. Pierre had conspired to kill her own husband, the woman's soul was already lost.

They entered the small parlor, which was loaded with half-packed cardboard boxes. So soon? wondered Miriam. Why did Mrs. Pierre make her escape this quickly? Miriam and the priest sat on a plastic-covered couch that Miriam admired. If she herself ever got something new, this was how she might preserve its freshness.

She half listened to the two speak their own private, French language, wishing she could follow more than the words of their bodily posture and their eyes. There! He had sprung his trap, accused the woman of infidelity and of a worse crime yet. Miriam could tell he had because of the fire in Mrs. Pierre's eyes.

Mrs. Pierre turned on Miriam. "You witch," she husked. "You pretend to be so kind. Then you make against me this hideous charge." She raised her finger. Miriam waited with bated breath. If someone did practice witchery here, that someone was not Miriam, but perhaps the witch was Mrs. Pierre. Miriam would have to admit that she quailed before that threatening finger.

But Mrs. Pierre's digit merely pointed the Haitian woman's visitors their way to the door. "Get out," she said. "I loved my husband. You know nothing of my life. Out of my house. Out!" The distraught widow, seeming less likely a killer than she had a mere ten minutes before, broke down into tears.

Miriam and the Voudon priest heard her and slunk readily enough out of the house, Miriam mentally seeing her own backside in retreat, her tail dropped low like a skulking fox. What could she do at this point but apologize abjectly to the *houngan*, who shrugged?

"The wife, um, maybe she killed him," he said. "I will ask the loa. I will ask St. Charles."

Miriam, chagrined to the soles of her feet, to her toes, smiled weakly in shame. She had thought too much of her own abilities and would never try detection again:

The sunning crocodile cannot gain forgiveness, only the builder bird who performs contrition. The Akan people at home in Ghana were known for their proverbs, and this was one Miriam well remembered. So the next morning she took a broom—not her best broom, to be sure, but the one she retained for the dirtier jobs—and went downstairs. She began to sweep the sidewalk just as Mr. Pierre had always done the first thing every day.

Mrs. Pierre and the child came up the basement steps after a while and Mrs. Pierre stared at Miriam, who did her best to look remorseful. "I want to help," Miriam said, after a moment.

"You want to be the super now. I think *you* killed my husband," declared Mrs. Pierre.

Heartsick not only because she'd been misunderstood, but because Mrs. Pierre had detected the stupid, fleeting thought Miriam had entertained of living in the basement rent free, Miriam shook her head and tears came to her eyes. She swept some snack packaging into her dustpan and opened one of the metal garbage bins.

Mrs. Pierre went down the steps, calling to her child, who turned to obey, then changed her mind and came toward Miriam.

At about that moment Mrs. Pierre's lover passed in the street. He smiled at little Isabelle and moved on.

Miriam stopped sweeping for a moment. "Is he the one who killed your papa?" she asked quietly. She had, it was true, promised herself she would mind her own business.

"No," said the little girl. "Papa's partner was angry and hit him, again and again."

Mrs. Pierre came halfway up the steps and watched Miriam and her daughter. "Come, Isabelle," the child's mother called harshly.

The little girl left and Miriam finished her cleaning up. Even if Mrs. Pierre didn't know this was Miriam's means of making amends, Miriam knew. She had to trust that what she did was right.

When Kofi got home that night, Miriam was ready for him. She'd gone to a liquor store with Nana, an emotionally grueling event for Miriam since she had never been in one before. She'd embarrassed herself by asking for palm wine, which the clerk had never even heard of, though Miriam couldn't imagine why not. Miriam judged the wines by their prices, while Nana had babbled on about the beauty of the labels and fancy-shaped, colored glass bottles. Now, Miriam set a glass of the red New York State wine in front of Kofi, along with a steaming bowl of fresh fish stew.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"Wine," Miriam answered, without more comment. What could she add? She'd always nagged at him when he'd had a beer or so with his fellow peddlers.

He sniffed the drink suspiciously. "You're not trying to poison me, are you, woman?" Miriam sighed, and Kofi drank judiciously. From across the table, Nana stared.

When Miriam got up to bring some requested salt and pepper from the kitchen, Nana followed her into the other room.

"This isn't going to work," Nana hissed in agitation. "He won't get drunk. And if he gets drunk, he won't go to sleep. I don't want to have sex with the old man. And, anyway, he'll remember in the morning that we didn't."

"He *will* get drunk," Miriam insisted quietly. She picked up the bottle to take it back to the table, then stopped. "And if he gets fresh with you, just slap him down. You know how to do that with a man, don't you?" Well, maybe not, all considered. "And if he does remember what you didn't do, don't worry. He'll never admit it." Why must Miriam always be the one to set everything right? She exhaled noisily again, this time over Nana.

Who had been Mr. Pierre's partner? Miriam, though sworn off the investigation, tried to puzzle out the answer, just for curiosity's

sake. She was sorely tempted to go to the basement and ring Mrs. Pierre's bell and ask, but she didn't relish being screamed at again. And still . . . and still, Mr. Pierre was dead and someone had killed him.

In the little grocery at 126th, Miriam stood peering at the prices on the chicken backs when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned, a smile on her lips, anticipating someone she was friendly with, but her welcoming expression met the dead serious face of Mrs. Pierre. Miriam's own face fell and she waited apprehensively.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Pierre. "You wanted only to help my husband, and I loved him. Even what it looks."

All around them on the streets of Harlem, inside this store, maybe even beside them examining the pork or the beef, were people from elsewhere, from everywhere, from Turkey, from Gambia, from Suriname, from Senegal. After so many years of living in this place, of seeing the costumes and hearing the accents, Miriam was used to a little fractured English. She understood. Her eyes met those of an earnest Mrs. Pierre.

"Thank you," said Miriam. She paused, afraid to stir up some further trouble. But how could she not go ahead and finish what she'd begun when the question of who had killed a decent man, a husband, a father, drove her to ask, "Just one thing more. Who was his partner?" She waited, simultaneously curious yet fearful of an angry response or an answer that exceeded expectation.

But Mrs. Pierre looked genuinely puzzled. "Partner? In what? He work for the *compagnie*. Downtown."

Yes, of course. Miriam knew that. Isabelle must have meant someone from the management company. Maybe the property manager who came around sometime. Her heart beat faster. She felt sure she was onto something.

But was that even possible? The property manager was a white man, while the killer was black. And no one else came from downtown, ever. A super from another of the buildings came sometimes to help Mr. Pierre, but he was a Spanish man and not black, either.

She put her hands over those of the unfortunate widow. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I feel sad for you and Isabelle." Her heart wrenched in its resting place and she wondered for a second, just again, whether Mrs. Pierre and her lover were not the actual culprits. She bit her lip and let go of the other woman with a shiver.

On her way back from the store, Miriam ran into a motherly school crossing guard from the fifth floor. Though doubtful that the answer might really lie in what the child had told her, Miriam asked regardless if the woman knew of any partner Mr. Pierre had.

The question didn't seem to make any more sense to the school crossing guard than it had to Mrs. Pierre. Even Miriam wondered why she pursued such a slim and nonsensical thread, a child's story.

Then, passing Suzy's Flower Nook, Miriam stepped down into the store. Suzy knew many people who came to her shop and heard a daily flood of neighborhood news. She was the center of a certain slice of the community. Suzy also sometimes gave Miriam a damaged palm frond she clipped off one of the trees for sale out front.

Miriam sat on a chair among the flowers outside while Suzy gossiped in back.

Finally alone, Suzy came out of the store, and Miriam exchanged friendly words with the shopkeeper. At length, Miriam simply blurted out her question. "You know Mr. Pierre, the super from my building who was killed? Perhaps he had a partner that you know of?"

"Oh sure," Suzy answered readily. She picked up a sprayer and misted some shiny green leaves upturned toward the brilliant morning sun. "He's been doing a deal with Abby Michaels, the tall guy with the dreadlocks from the Bahamas. Mr. Pierre tells Abby about an empty apartment and Abby gets a client, who pays a fee under the table. I don't really know much more than that."

On her way home, Miriam let her mind race wildly over the information. She couldn't stop her thoughts from running riot, in fact.

Abby Michaels? Being an inveterate reader of every sign and symbol along the local urban landscape, Miriam had seen flyers on lampposts in the neighborhood that declared, LOW-COST APARTMENTS, LOW FEES, with the man's name and number. Now, instead of going inside, she walked around the nearby park, seeking out one of those notices with the little slips the apartment seekers could tear off so they might call. But why is it that when you look for something you see all the time, it's never there?

She returned, discouraged, to the front of her building and opened the door. Oh yes, she knew she'd seen such a sign recently, although not exactly where. The paper taped on the tile inside the door simply said, "Know of Any Vacant Apartments? Call today and earn a Finder's Fee for any tip that results in a rental." The name on the fresh announcement was Abby Michaels, and his number was given.

Kofi didn't like to have a phone. He couldn't understand the use of them when they might move their own feet to go make an inquiry, rather than waste a quarter. So after placing her groceries in the refrigerator, Miriam went out again in the heat and found a phone at 122nd Street.

"Hello," she said. "I know about a nice, empty apartment . . ."

Miriam was both flustered and prepared. Prepared, yes, but she knew her plan could fall to pieces in a heartbeat and she'd be eyeball to eyeball with a man who'd already killed at least one time. All she wanted was a chance to be sure of his guilt. She swallowed hard, trying to keep her stomach in its preferred internal position, and pushed the bell. The door buzzed back and she entered the building.

A tall man with very long dreadlocks came out into the hall to greet Miriam. He smiled when she introduced herself and they shook hands, a puzzling procedure she had practiced no more than three times in her entire life.

"You must come," she said. "I want you to come see the apartment." Had she spoken too nervously, too loudly?

"Now?" he responded.

"Yes, yes, now," she agreed.

He was surprised, but nonetheless not unwilling. He stuck a notebook under his arm, locked the door, and left the building with her—a nice building too. "How big are the apartments here?" she asked curiously, forgetting herself. "What might a two bedroom cost?" A two bedroom apartment would be better for four.

"Fifteen hundred," he answered.

Miriam took quite a while to digest that high a number. She had seen their rent bills, which came to \$615.07, an amount she thought quite great enough.

She marched her suspect around Marcus Garvey Park from 124th to 123rd and proceeded west past the Ethiopian synagogue.

Abby Michaels cleared his throat. "On 123rd?" he asked. Did his voice break when he asked the question? Was he afraid?

"Near Frederick Douglass Boulevard," she lied. Had the muscles in his shoulders eased when she'd said that? He nodded at her. "How much will you pay me for the tip?" she asked smartly.

"One hundred dollars if the rental pans out."

She brightened for a moment, thinking of the money, forgetting she wasn't leading him anywhere real, after all. "Do you have a cell phone?" she inquired. She was very unsure of this part of her plan. "May I use it to alert the super?" She had never used a cell phone before, but Nana had done so and had explained how the dialing was done.

Michaels gave her the small device, but she couldn't figure out its use, so he showed her, asked her for the number so he could key it in himself, but she was afraid. "No, I can now," she said, and she did so perfectly.

In a strained voice she told the person who answered where

they were now, pretended to listen to a knowing response, and said, "Soon. Please. Soon." She hung up, nodded to Michaels, hoping her face wouldn't give her away, and returned the phone. They approached Miriam's building, where poor Mr. Pierre had met his untimely end. No one was outside to stop their progression. The street was quiet.

Suddenly, Miriam spotted a small face peeping over the top of the basement steps. She had asked Isabelle to station herself so she might not be seen but could identify her father's partner, and here was the little girl as she'd promised. Miriam let out an odd groan. The door to the building flew open just then and Nana popped out. "Mama," she said, "I looked for you to tell you what happened last night."

At exactly that minute the child came up from under the stairs and, heedless of the danger, pointed her two fingers like daggers at Michaels. "That's the one," she told Miriam excitedly. "He kill my papa."

Michaels made to move away, but Miriam latched onto his arm. She had to hold him until the police from the precinct, whom she had used his phone to call, arrived. If they were coming. God willing they would come.

Michaels tried to pull away from Miriam and made to hit her, but Nana, right there, quickly kicked him in the leg. Michaels drew away, however, nearly knocking Miriam onto the ground as he did so. Just as she clutched onto the railing alongside the building front, Kofi neared the building, returning from the market with his cart. Apparently he had seen the attack on his wife and he ran up to Michaels, while Miriam panted from exertion, tripping him up and causing him to fall.

Little Isabelle had begun to cry with great emotion, and her mother's head appeared and then her torso. She pulled a broom along as she arrived on the sidewalk and aimed it at the man obviously the disturber of the neighborhood peace.

A blue and white car arrived on the scene with two patrolmen, who hopped out at once. Still slightly out of breath, but satisfied, Miriam indicated Michaels while watching Mrs. Pierre's blows on the man's back with the broom. "Arrest him," Miriam told the uniformed officers. "He's the man who murdered that child's father."

Nothing could ever be simple about justice, of course, but the killer waited in the jail for his day in court. Mrs. Pierre went off with her new husband and Isabelle to live in Queens. Or was Jamaica really in Queens, New York, or someplace in the Caribbean? Miriam wasn't quite sure. And a new super came to

live in the basement—too much space for a single man, Miriam thought. Nana flirted with him though her abdomen grew large. Miriam wondered if Nana's getting married a second time would be quite legal. Of course, in this country Nana's first marriage to Kofi wouldn't be considered right . . . ?

All these plans in Miriam's head were naturally somewhat vague at this point in time, but she could well envision Nana living in the basement with the new super and a darling baby boy or girl. Miriam and Kofi would be free of the crying, but they could be fond . . . well, something like grandparents, or approximately.

And in winter, if the apartment got colder than it should, bothering her aging bones, Miriam could bang on the pipes until it reverberated all the way down in Nana's new house. Nana, of course, would understand and nag her husband—as Miriam supposed he might become—until the steam snapped on throughout the building.

Kofi, in the meantime, proud of his capture of the killer, made out in front of Miriam as if he were the father—though in front of the neighbors . . . Kofi and Miriam just shrugged. As far as the neighbors were concerned, Nana was the couple's daughter.

Girls will be girls, while boys will trick them badly, and sometimes more human beings would be the result. ♫

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

JQ SX XGD DQZ JVGJL G JGXI RP YEI NRVXY
 NQVYD-IRTEY EQZVX, HINQVI YEI YVGRM TQIX
 JQMW. GNYIV YEGY, RY'X OQXYMD WZOH MZJL.
 —WGARW IWTIVMID TGYIX

CIPHER: _____

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 107

JUICE

JAS. R. PETRIN

Leo Skorzeny pulled the aging Crown Victoria over to the curb and peered up at Paiche's apartment building through the tinted strip at the top of the windshield, hunching his short thick neck. He had to lean well forward; the Vic was a boat of a car. Skig didn't shut the engine off but knew that he probably should; the guy was never ready on time, one of those bums habitually late, late for his own damn funeral.

After five or six minutes, Paiche strolled out the front door and came majestically down the steps. He was a tall, broad man with short, tufted white hair, and forty or fifty pounds of extra gut on him. His mouth was partly open, two chipped teeth showing. He wore horn-rimmed spectacles and an open tweed sport jacket so bagged out at the front that it drooped almost to his knees. He carefully crossed the weed-ridden boulevard and eased himself into the car. The Crown Vic sagged under his weight.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Sure," Skig said, "I can see that. You don't give a damn about my time. My time's worth nothing, yours is worth everything."

"I said I was sorry. It's called an apology." Paiche hauled the door shut with no discernable sign of remorse; he was used to Skig. "So what's on for tonight?"

He began pawing through Skig's glove compartment.

"If you're looking for mints in there," Skig said, "forget it. I ate the last one myself ten minutes ago. Thought I'd need the extra nourishment, waiting around for you."

"Will you let it go? What's on for tonight, I'm asking you?" Paiche gave up searching and clicked the glove box shut. He settled back into the leather seat. He didn't do up the seat belt. He never did. He said they were dangerous, that they'd trap you there inside when the car was going up in flames or something.

"Two things." Skig checked his mirror and slipped the gear selector into drive. The car jerked forward hard when he did that, the idle set too fast. Skig gradually picked up speed until they were sailing grandly down North Park Street, halted obediently at the stop sign, then hung a slow, looping left onto Cogswell. Traffic was



Daniel Galanaugh

light. "First thing is that skinny Irishman. I was thinking before, I'd give him a couple more days. Now I think I'll have to do something about him right now."

"You should do something about that fast idle," Paiche said. "It's gonna screw your transmission, you keep dropping it into gear like that."

"I like a fast idle. Didn't we already have this discussion, maybe three or four hundred times? I told you. This way, moving slow, I can drive with my brake pedal. It's what I like, if that's okay with you."

Paiche shrugged. He could see Skig was touchier than usual today. One thing he'd learned over their long association, Skig had his ways. Better not to ask questions, just get the work done and be home that much sooner; with any luck he'd be there in time to catch the end of the Leafs game. But the car rankled him; he always had to mention it, he couldn't help himself.

They rolled along silently until Skig eased out of traffic and stopped before an ancient redbrick building with tall arching windows that needed a wash; together they looked sideways at it out the driver's window. A wrought-iron railing protected an open stairwell leading down below sidewalk level. A sign on the iron bars read L. REGAN HOLDINGS—LONG AND SHORT TERM LEASES—ENQUIRE RATES.

"What I think," Paiche said, throwing a glance at Skig with his wiry eyebrows raised, "is that you oughta get a new ride. Maybe a nice new Lincoln Town Car. This one's just about shot."

"You don't like my car, you can walk."

"I'm only telling you, that's all," Paiche said. "Jeez, you got a bug up you today!" After much searching he had located a well-aged stick of gum in his jacket pocket and was now unwrapping it with slow, deliberate purpose. "You want me to handle the Irishman?"

"That'd be nice. Then when payday comes, I won't have to wonder so hard about why I'm giving money to you."

Paiche folded the stick of gum in half and inserted it neatly in his mouth. He got out of the car, dropped the gum wrapper on the street, and paused a moment to hoist his pants up. He hoisted them from the back with his thumbs—he had long since given up hoisting them at the front, with the gut he had on him now. In deliberate, unhurried motions, he passed in front of the car, stepped up the curb, walked around the iron railing, and started down the steps. He wrinkled his nose. The grubby stairwell smelled like urine. At the bottom was a clutter of candy wrappers, dead leaves, and cigarette butts. A scarred wooden door with steel burglar bars protected a grimy window. He opened the door and went in.

The room was about ten feet square. It had a battered service

counter, a yellowing desktop computer, and a four-drawer filing cabinet piled high on top with what looked like blank invoices; a smiley-face sticker on the side of the filing cabinet said "Have a nice day!" A camel coat hung on the back of a chair. A skinny guy in a rust-colored suit, his dirty blond hair pulled back into a ponytail, came slouching out of the back, his salesman's smile evaporating the instant he recognized his visitor.

"Oh jeez," he said, "I meant to call you. Listen. I'm getting the money—"

"Nope," Paiche said, "I'm getting it. That's why I'm here. To pick it up. Seven large, plus six, I believe you owe the man, matter of fact."

"Look, Peach," the Irishman said, "I realize I'm a day or two late, but my brother-in-law, that moron in Montreal, he was supposed to move some office materials—you know, those modular systems they use now; three truckloads coming up from New York, which is where my cash is tied up at the moment, and—"

Paiche sighed like a whale emerging from the depths. "So what you're telling me is, you haven't got it. The seven-six that is due today."

The blond guy hesitated. He didn't want to say no. He seemed to be considering his options, weighing the benefits of continuing his wheedling tone. He thought better of that and took a tougher line. "When I get paid, Peach, Skig will get paid. I'll bring the cash right to him. I can't do any better than that."

He might as well have jabbed Paiche with a tack. Paiche was quick on his feet for a grossly overweight man in his fifties. He moved in and slapped the blond guy hard under one ear with the flat of his hand. He didn't wind up for it but put enough weight behind it to send the younger man staggering into the file cabinet. The stack of what looked like invoices swayed, then toppled onto the floor. Paiche came forward a step and gave the blond guy another one, this time sending blood spatter from a bleeding nose up the wall. The blond guy's legs folded, and he dropped to his knees, cupping his hands protectively over his face.

Paiche leaned forward, grunting, took a handful of the guy's shirt, reaching under the suit jacket lapels to do it, raised him up off the floor, and dropped him in the steel office chair behind the computer.

"Now you listen to me," he said evenly. "We are not a bank. We are not a credit union. We are not a patient and generous uncle. You were aware of this when you took our terms. So have the money tomorrow, seven-nine this time, which is including the additional late charge."

Frowning distastefully, Paiche used the sleeve of the camel coat

to wipe a speck of blood off the back of his wrist. He really ought to carry disposable gloves like the cops were using now; it was never an issue in the old days, but the way things were lately, you couldn't be too careful. He left the blond guy bent over his bloodied hands and went back up the stairwell to the car.

"He didn't have it," Paiche said, getting in, "the *schiesser*. But I think you already expected that. I told him tomorrow it's seven-six plus the extra juice—seven-nine."

Skig set his jaw but didn't say anything. He dropped the transmission into gear, and after the violent jerk, carefully drifted the big old car back out into traffic, paying a lot of attention to his mirrors. He was a careful driver and had never had a citation. Paiche was still talking.

"Dumb mick wanted me to bend the rules for him. Like it was news to him the way you operate."

"They always try that," Skig said, "when they're short. They don't think about how fast the juice piles up."

"It piles up fast."

"Real fast. But they don't think about it."

"No. Not till it bites 'em, they don't."

Paiche gazed around without expression. They were passing shorter, darker buildings now, Skig rolling slowly down sloping Halifax streets, one foot on the brake, moving in on the waterfront docks. "So where to now?" Paiche asked. He wondered briefly about the Leafs game he was missing, what the score was. Too bad Skig's radio didn't work.

"Water Street," Skig said. "And this time it's a tough one."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." They rumbled over a stretch of cobblestones, maneuvered through a knot of stevedores grouped around a forklift, braked gently to turn onto a tar-blackened wharf, and continued out along the length of it toward the open water. The heavy timbers made round thumping sounds under the fat tires of the Crown Vic. "This one's personal," Skig said.

"Uh-huh."

"This one I been thinking about all day, how to handle it."

"They're always the worst, those kind."

"You remember Milchard?"

Paiche thought a minute. "No, can't say I do."

"I thought you'd remember Milchard. You don't remember him?"

"I said I don't."

"You should remember him. Guy you pushed out maybe three, four months ago, when you took over his action there with the cigarettes."

"Oh, that Milchard."

"Yeah, that one." They were a good ways out onto the wharf. Skig came to a gentle stop, checked his rearview and side mirrors, then backed the car with the steering wheel cranked hard to the left until they were parked sideways on the wharf, the right side of the car up tight against a dumpster. In front of them at the next jetty over, their view out the windshield was dominated by the battered dark hull of a derelict freighter, most of its upper work turning to rust and running down its sides in long, ugly stains. There was eight yards of water between them and the ship. Skig left the engine running, the air-conditioning switched on, and said, nodding up at the towering superstructure, "You see that? It's where Milchard lives now."

"You mean onna boat?" said Paiche, mildly surprised, gazing up.

Skig nodded. "He got it cheap. Part of some crazy business plan. Turn it into a floating storage facility. Idea is, people come and rent space on it from him, store the junk they don't have room for anyplace else."

"You mentioned this stop was personal," Paiche said. "What do you mean?"

"It starts with Milchard. But I got to back up a bit. The guy came to see me not so long ago."

Paiche grunted. "Don't tell me, let me guess. He needed cash."

"Uh-huh."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Nothing gets by you, does it? People need cash, they come to me. You figured that out all by yourself."

"I thought maybe he came about the cigarettes. Bitching to you about me. Knew I worked for you, didn't know you and me are tight."

"Oh, he knows all right."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. And if you stop running your mouth for a minute, I'll get around to explaining it." Skig adjusted the air-conditioning, moved the power seat back to make more room for his legs. "He comes to me with this proposition. He calls it 'cash for information.' Says it's a win-win deal. Says it's top-grade stuff, I can't go wrong on it."

"Making up his own game, you mean, like the Irishman."

"I guess you could say that."

"So you told him what he could do with it."

"Well, I kinda did, at first. Told him I don't operate that way, that I got my own system, which maybe isn't what everybody likes but which happens to work for me. And I don't screw with it—I told him that."

"So?"

"So, he says for me to give a listen first to what he's got to say."

"Oh yeah?" Paiche stirred his feet, growing impatient with Skig's out-of-character long-windedness. He glanced at the graffiti-soiled side of the dumpster looming there outside his window, then stared back out through the windshield again. The Leafs game would be going into the second period now. Leafs playing Boston, just like in the old days. Paiche hated the expansion teams, always had. Couldn't sort out who was who anymore. Things changed. "So what was it?"

"I'll get to that," Skig said. "But first there's this other thing, one of the reasons I brought you here. I wanted to tell you something. Something which is, well, from my point of view, very important."

Paiche rotated his big head toward Skig, his curiosity finally aroused. He sat there chewing his gum, his mouth partly open, revealing those two busted front teeth. Jeez. Taking shots at Skig's car, and the guy couldn't even get his teeth fixed after all these years? The kind of money he made? People just don't see themselves.

"So what is it?" Paiche said, as if to hurry Skig along. "What's so important that you want to tell me?"

"I'm dyin'."

Paiche stopped chewing. He went on looking at Skig, his flat expressionless face unchanging, his bulbous eyes continuing to stare. It was like everything behind that stare had shut down for a second. He cleared his throat. "You're what?"

Skig said, "I don't talk too good anymore? You want me to write it down for you?" Irritably, he jerked a notepad out from under a thick elastic wrapped around the sun visor and tossed it on the seat between them. It bounced and fell on the floor. "Or maybe, I just thought of it, I probably don't write so good anymore, either!"

Paiche finally blinked. "It's not that, Skig. It's, well, jeez! What you're telling me. It's heavy. It's very heavy. You're kidding me about this, right?"

"I'm not kidding you. If I was, I'd be grinning."

Paiche rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb, took a deep breath as if to steady himself, then let the air out slowly through pursed lips. "All right, you're not kidding me. But hey! Drop something like that on a guy, it takes you a minute. What do you mean dying? You mean it's something your doctor told you?"

"It's something my doctor told me," Skig confirmed, "something in the colon, how else am I gonna know? You think I do my own proctology, I sent away for a kit or something? Of course, I went to the lousy doctor. My own lousy doctor. If I live another two

months, the way he explained it to me, I'll be doing good. Which I thought was a damn strange way of putting it, but those were the words he used."

Paiche closed his eyes, held them shut a while, then slowly opened them. He was starting to chew again.

"Okay. So that's what he told you. But naturally you got a second opinion?"

"Naturally. I got two, in fact. One from a lady doctor; *that* was an experience. And it turns out, according to these other two, that my own doc was right."

Paiche shook his head in slow, small movements. He shifted his bulk, the seat creaking under him. "Well. I mean—wow! This is tough, Skig, really tough. And he just lays it on you flat out like that, no easing into it or—"

"He tells me this, I get it all checked out—the two other doctors, specialists—and he's right. There's no getting round it. It's a fact and I got to accept it. So I spend a couple days thinking about it, and I decide, since I'm running outta time, what I better do is get my life in order. Don't put nothing off. Balance the books." Skig gazed with brooding insight at the rusting ship, the ship that had come here to die. "Make sure everything is taken care of while I can still stand up, no loose threads, nothing left undone."

"Man, all your dough, your investments—"

"The dough I got is taken care of, that part don't worry me one bit."

Paiche shrugged. "Well, whatever. I'm only saying anything I can do to help, Skig. Anything you need me to do, I'll do it, you know that." He lifted his head as if it weighed too much. "But listen, I still can't get over this! You getting news like that. First, in the spring, Jeanette, and now—"

Skig's eyes narrowed. He had told Paiche not to talk about Jeanette. He had tried to put those last few months with her out of his mind, those long, agonizing, hopeless months, trudging to the cancer treatment ward every day and seeing her lying there helpless on the bed like that, asking him who he was. Thirty years of marriage and he hadn't wanted to talk about it. Not with anybody. And in the end, that's what had brought them here. Funny how things worked out.

"This is why I want to talk about Milchard," Skig said, deliberately interrupting. "He comes to me, says he's got a good chance to get this floating storage idea moving, he just needs a little more time and a little more cash."

"Naturally," Paiche said.

"Yeah, naturally. It's what a guy like him does say, of course. Only

Milchard, he's got this suggestion. This proposal. This information angle. I remind him what he already owes me, I repeat to him what my terms are, and he says to me he understands all that, but he's got a proposition which he thinks I might be interested in."

"He would have. The weasel."

"That's just what he is. Exactly what he is. He gets in the car with me, gives directions, and we go for a drive. We come out this way, right here to this dock, in fact. This is before he starts living on the boat. He's sitting right there where you're sitting now, brought me here to see it, and he's excited about it, nervous, drumming his fingers on his knees like a junkie. He says to me, 'Skig,' he says, 'it's an idea that just can't miss. A floating storage facility. But it'll take months to get the thing established, all the permits and inspections they're throwing at me. Might take a whole extra year, Skig, to get a cash flow, and by that time the juice—well, the juice will kill me. So like I mentioned,' he says, 'for a little more cash, for a break on the interest charges, what I can offer you is information.'"

"He told you this?"

"He did."

"The weasel," Paiche said.

"I tell him again I don't deal in information, I'm not the friggin' CIA. He tells me he understands what I'm saying, but that this info is something I'll want to have. 'You mean it's personal?' I ask him, and he says, 'Yeah.' I think about it and I figure what the hell. Could be he knows about some guy wants to whack me. I mean, it wouldn't be the first time someone got that idea, would it? So I tell him okay, no guarantees, but go ahead and talk, it's his nickel.

"No, he says, he *needs* a guarantee. I tell him, what is this? Am I in the washing machine business? Only guarantee he's gonna get, I tell him, is a boot where it hurts if he's wasting my time. So he sulks a minute, and then finally he talks to me. He talks to me about a skinny guy."

"A skinny guy?"

Skig nodded. He gazed straight ahead out the windshield, studying with intense concentration an ugly patch of rust on the side of the ship. "I almost wish to hell he hadn't. I almost wish he hadn't told me anything."

"Bad news, was it?"

"You could say that."

"Which is why we're here today, right? You want me to go up there an' take the sonofabitch apart."

"I'd like nothing better," Skig said, "believe me. But wait for the rest of it. He keeps talking, and I sit here listening, and at first I

can't believe what he's telling me. I don't know if he's lying to me, or just what. I hoped he was lying, I'd know how to handle that. But what he's saying to me has started me thinking, going back a whole lotta years, and I realize that everything he's telling me is rock solid. It all adds up. It explains things, the way they were happening back then."

Paiche said, "I wouldn't of listened to him. I'd of thrown the weasel off the dock."

Somewhere a big ship grunted. Skig opened the front power windows and pushed his elbow out. He left the engine running but shut the air off. He found the cigarettes he'd bought that morning, opened the pack—all these screaming death warnings all over it!—put one in his mouth, and lit it with the car cigarette lighter.

Paiche said sternly, "Listen, Skig, you gave those things up years ago. You think you should be starting in again the way your health is now?"

Skig raised his voice. "And do you think it matters, you dumb jerk?"

Paiche sank back.

Skig said, "Where was I?"

"You were telling me about Milchard and a skinny guy."

"I know what I was telling you. Milchard, the S.O.B., said what he had to say and I knew it was true. Every word of it. And the reason I knew is because it lined up perfect with what was going on back then—he's talking twenny-five, maybe twenny-six years ago, you understand. Back to that time when Jeanette and me weren't getting along so good."

"It was about Jeanette, was it?"

"Yeah. It was about Jeanette."

"So what did he say?"

"He told me—sat right there where you're sitting—that he used to see Jeanette probably once a week in those days. At a hotel out Tantallon, there." He flicked his ash out the window. "She'd show up there with this skinny guy. She was screwing around on me."

"He actually had the nerve to tell you a thing like that?"

"In so many words, he did."

"Gotta be bullshit," Paiche said. "The guy's a nut bar. You believed him? Saying a thing like that to you?"

Skig took a draw on the cigarette, and blew the smoke out the window.

"I didn't want to believe it. I still don't. But I do believe it all the same. Back in those days, the way I remember things, she wasn't home a lot of the time. She had these excuses—Tupperware parties, some kinda sewing circle, Neighborhood Watch meetings—

everything going. She was keen on that last one, keep the neighborhood free of crime. But at that time we couldn't be in the same room with each other, it was like there was this electrical field between us, ready to spark. So I was glad when she went out to her meetings. I would just head out and have a beer with the guys."

Skig adjusted the rearview mirror.

"Well, it turns out it was something more than meetings she was going to. What it was, I find out now, she was bouncing around in the sack half the time."

Paiche was shaking his head. "I don't get it. That weasel Milchard has the nerve to tell you a thing like that? What's his angle? Has the guy got a death wish?"

A silence fell between them. Through the open windows of the car, over a lull in the harbor noise, they could hear the tide coming in, sloshing and sucking at the pilings under them. A tug went sliding by the end of the wharf, a tough, impersonal-looking boat, old tires bigger than Skig's car slung across its bows. Raw power. All business. Skig admired that.

"How come you're so quiet all of a sudden?" he said to Paiche. "You're yappin' a mile a minute a while ago, an' now you're not saying nothing."

"You told me you don't like to talk about Jeanette—"

"Which you never paid no mind to before."

"Sure I did. Of course I did. And this is a touchy subject, talking about her this way. That sleaze Milchard! Like he could prove any of this crap about her . . ."

"It ain't her. I'm concerned about. She's dead. Just like I'm gonna be pretty damn soon. No, what concerns me, Peach, is the living—"

"That friggin' Milchard. I'll go up there and sink his boat with him in it!"

"—twenny-five years ago, and nothing done about it. You know what that means in my line of work? It means the juice has been piling up. It's been piling up all this time. In fact, it has piled up so much by now, I don't think nobody could actually count that high, and the thing is, it didn't have to be this way. If someone had come to me back then, explained things, I could of done something, sorted it out. But now the vig is so totally out of hand, nobody can pay it. Not if they wanted to."

Paiche sat there staring straight ahead. The sun had slowly moved on and now the shadow of the rusting freighter lay in a line across his face. Slowly he extracted the gum from his mouth, tasteless now, all the flavor gone out of it; he stuck it on the side of the dumpster, the big wall of steel there at the side of the car.

"Let me go up there, Skig," Paiche said, "and lay a beating on the guy."

"Now, say you was me," Skig said. "Say you were in my position. Having the doctors tell you you're a dead man walking, finding all this out about your wife—it's a lot for a man to think about. What would you do?"

"If it was me, Skig, I don't think I'd of listened to him. I think I'd of thrown him off the dock."

"It crossed my mind."

"Dragging Jeanette's name through the mud like that, just to chisel some extra dough outta you. What's the matter with that guy? Whatever happened all that time ago is over with. What someone might of done is ancient history. You and Jeanette go so far back together, you were there for each other half your lives . . ."

"That's kinda the point, isn't it?"

"I mean you were really close the last ten, twenny years."

"That only means I was lied to for ten, twenny years."

"She wouldn't of lied to you."

"People can lie, the way I see it, by not saying a goddamn word about something!"

"Come on. That's crazy."

"Oh, so I'm crazy now. Aren't I a piece of work. Dying, can't talk right, and crazy. A freakin' basket case is what I am!"

"That's not what I mean."

"Okay, what *do* you mean?"

"I mean you haven't thought this thing through. Most likely Milchard is fulla crap. Tryin' to play you. Probably nothing he told you is true. But even if it is, you gotta think about Jeanette. Hell, we were all young and stupid once."

"Somebody goes behind my back an' then sits in the bush practically half my life, laughing at me—"

"Skig—"

"Somebody does that to me, they're gonna pay. They're gonna have to pay the juice on it. Anybody knows me, they understand that. I set down the rules, and I said nobody better *forget* those rules, because *I* wasn't gonna forget them, right? From day *one* this was."

"But think for a minute, Skig. How would Milchard know about this? I mean, how would he know about this skinny guy—"

"He told me 'cause he knows what I'm like. He knows I don't like to take no crap. He was the manager of that hotel, Peach. He seen her twice a week. And the skinny guy—" He looked at Paiche. "Well, he says that was you!"

The car was struck with a paralyzing silence. Cold. As if the air-conditioning was going full blast.

Skig said, "We weren't always fat old men, you and me. Back then, all them years ago, you used to be as skinny as a rake handle. In fact, we used to call you The Stick, remember?" He kept staring. "And all those times Jeanette was out of the house, you were never there with us at the bar, Peach. Never once."

Paiche wouldn't look at him. Kept staring straight out the windshield at the side of the ship. Skig leaned forward over the steering wheel, trying to force Paiche to meet his gaze.

"Nothing to say?"

Paiche remained silent.

Skig's left hand dropped to the power window controls, and the two back windows slid all the way down. He pressed the master power door-lock button, then popped the trunk.

"It ain't like you, Peach, to be so quiet. A guy like you, I figured you'd have all kinds of excuses. All kinds of arguments."

Paiche had a look on his face of total shock. Like someone had knocked him in the head with a brick. His skin had turned a mud-gray color, and his tongue, shriveled and dry, raked his lips.

Paiche said finally, "Skig. Stop an' *think* a minute. That was twenty-five years ago. And you're dying, you said, for cryin' out loud!"

"What's that got to do with anything? Nobody gets off the hook. That's the bottom line. I let somebody get away with something, I'm a loser. And Leo Skorzeny ain't no loser, Peach. He never was and he isn't now!"

Skig got out of the car and slammed the door. He lowered his red, furrowed face to the window and peered in. Paiche was pawing ineffectually at his door handle. He finally raised his eyes to Skig's. It was a meek and helpless gaze.

"Do up your seat belt, Peach," Skig said.

"What?"

"Do up your belt."

Paiche gaped for a second as if he didn't understand the instruction. Confused, he fumbled for the belt, drew it out, and pulled it clumsily around himself. Clicked it in place.

He spoke in a whisper.

"These belts are no good, Skig, they can jam on you."

"That one especially," Skig said.

Paiche's eyes opened wider. They looked huge and distorted behind his thick horn-rimmed glasses. His voice sounded hollow inside the car. "Think about this, Skig! Have a heart, for cryin' out loud! We been friends, Skig! Friends for years!" Beads of sweat were popping out on his face. His big shoulders were hunched, his hands pawed at the seat belt release.

"Juice time, Peach," Skig said.

Reaching in, he yanked the gear lever down. The transmission thunked, and the Vic leaped forward on its fast idle. Paiche made a whinnying sound, fighting with the belt.

The Crown Vic was moving maybe six or eight miles an hour when its front tires hit the ridge board at the edge of the wharf. It bounced on its soft springs, then lifted as the big fifteen-inch wheels rode up over the obstruction. It seemed to hesitate for a second, then the hood dropped, and it made an eight-foot dive into the Atlantic Ocean. There was a tremendous splash. Skig stepped to the edge of the wharf and looked down. The Vic was foundering, tilting sharply forward in the water. He could see the back of Peach's head through the tinted glass, could see the guy heaving his upper body around.

"Have a good one, Peach," he said, as the Crown Vic nosed over sharply, taillights pointing at the sky. Water gushed in through the windows and the wide-open trunk, and dragged the car quickly under. Skig flipped his cigarette butt after it.

One of the stevedores, a young guy, was coming at a run. He drew up, panting, at Skig's side.

"What happened," Skig told him, calmly explaining, "I got outta the car to go around and help him with his seat belt. The thing jams. I didn't realize I left the car in gear an' I guess it must of got away from me."

The stevie glanced at the wharf where the car had been, looked at the bubbles, and said in disbelief, "You mean there's a guy in there? And you're just standing here? I don't think—"

Skig said, "Let me just tell you something—I don't give a damn what you think!" He stopped paying attention to the man and took a last, satisfied look at the roiling bubbles. Somewhere a siren was whoop-whooping off the sides of the buildings, getting closer. More of the stevies were gathering. Skig turned away and started trudging back along the wharf toward Water Street. 🐦

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

PERPETUAL CARE

ELAINE MENGE

I walk in the neighborhood a lot, since Mom plays the TV loud enough to burst an eardrum. We're always battling over that issue. Sometimes I win, but when I give in—she's going on eighty next month, after all—I think, what's the outdoors for but to be out in? If you can still brave the elements, you should. Mom never braved them for more than a few measly picnics in her life. I take one look at her lounging on our well-worn sofa, wrapped up to her chin in the olive green afghan she knitted over thirty years ago, and even if it's a drizzly day in December, I say to myself, "I'm out of here."

When I encourage her to take a walk, she says, "Boys can stand the outdoors better than girls. You're a grown boy, so go. I'm not risking my health."

What health? She has all these allergies, and when they morph into bronchitis, that isn't very pleasant to listen to.

I've lived here all my life, except the two years I had an apartment across town, when Lisa moved in with me. Then Lisa moved out. She said, "I've had it." I wasn't sure what that meant, but it ended up being a definitive statement. Mom was having these health problems, so I moved back home.

That makes forty-one years I've lived here, not counting those two. Mom had me late in life, nine years after my sister Bess. So you could say I'm well acquainted with this neighborhood. Some of the older residents who knew me from a kid count on me, in fact, to look after things when they hobble off to visit their grandkids. They regard me as one of those Barney Fife types, a misguided, self-deputized, secretly gun-toting Neighborhood Watch honcho—as if I get a bang out of keeping an anal-retentive eye on their property and I'm just itching to call the cops at the sight of any mildly suspicious other-hued alien who wanders into this bland, mind-numbing territory.

Not true.

I simply do it—keep an eye on things—because I'm here. Crime is worse nowadays. I *don't* like bad guys breaking into some older neighbor's home and snatching her jewelry, most of

which, admittedly, is junk, but which has sentimental value to these folks. Might as well help out. What else is there to do? Once I check the status of my investments for the day on the computer and make whatever adjustments I deem sensible—and I have had great intuition about the market, truly stupendous intuition—

Looking down from my bedroom window, I saw that the house next door was being devoured.

then I enjoy walking around the neighborhood. I'm a very observant guy: I can tell you who's out of town at any given time, who's bought a new appliance, who's resumed smoking after making a big deal about quitting. I can tell you if a particular shrub has been pruned, whose gas barbecue is on the blink.

But mostly, there's nothing to report. Walking in this neighborhood is what I imagine hiking around a feudal fiefdom in the Middle Ages must have been like. Same old, same old. Seasons change. In this part of Arizona, the changes are slight. Low humidity, not much rain, no snow to speak of. A little colder, a little hotter. The sameness makes you long for something, anything, to happen. If one of these houses were to burn down (with no one in it, of course), that would be awesome, as the teens around here say. Awesome this, awesome that. Well, there hasn't been anything awesome to report around here in decades.

Until a year ago.

When I was a kid, there were still a few empty lots. One by one they sold. Foundations would be poured; new houses reared up. My dad and I, before he cut out, had some nice times visiting the construction sites. We liked seeing the changes. Once a foundation was poured, you could walk on it and figure out where the kitchen and bathrooms would be just from the way the pipes stuck up out of the fresh concrete. Next came the studded walls. Electricians would pay a visit, and you'd see how the wires ran, where the outlets and switch plates were hung. Dad would point out how this or that placement didn't make sense or would be a nuisance later on. The owner might show up and talk about it with him. He'd thank Dad for his input.

Dad was a tool salesman at Sears, way back, but he knew a lot about construction and electrical circuitry, and the owners of those new houses always took his advice. Dad left Mom and me years ago—even started a new family. I've never met them, my half brother and sister. He's dead now, anyway. Seven years ago this May. When Mom heard the news she said, "Serves him right,"

then went right back to watching *Wheel of Fortune* as if nothing had happened. To me it was as if someone had thrown a sizeable boulder into a pond and all the rings of water radiating out from that event did not touch her in the least. And sadly, that was the case, even before Dad left. When he cut out, I secretly said to myself, though his absence hurt me bad, "More power to you, old man." But sometimes I'm pretty mad about it. If he hadn't left, I might not feel I have to be here now. I might have what Sis calls a more normal life.

A little less than a year ago, something new did happen, and it would have been worth writing home about, if I'd ever left home. I didn't have to walk far to keep an eye on the action either, because it happened right next door.

I woke up one morning to hear a ferocious noise, as if the granddaddy of all lawn mowers had been set loose. Looking down from my upstairs bedroom window, I saw that the house next door, the Whittys' old place, was being devoured. It's a corner house, the last on this end of the subdivision before an empty field owned by the town opens up. This tractorlike machine with huge claws was biting into the white clapboard house with so little trouble that you'd think the place had been all water-based glue and toothpicks.

To mix metaphors, Mother always called that house a house of cards, back when the Whittys lived there. The Whittys left years ago. After they moved away, an older, very quiet couple, the Graces, occupied the place. They were so quiet that I wasn't even aware that Mr. Grace had died two months earlier, and Mrs. Grace had been put in a nursing home by her son, or that the house had even been up for sale. There'd been no FOR SALE sign. But it did change hands. Wish I'd known. I might have bought it myself. Then I could have moved next door, had a little more freedom, but still have been close if Mom needed me.

I still can't believe I missed the changes going on over there with the Graces. My excuse is, I mostly take an interest in happenings farther afield—down the block, not right next door. I did notice that the lawn hadn't been cut in the last two weeks, but that was about it.

The entire lot was bulldozed, except for a pecan tree in the back yard that Nat and I—Nat was the Whittys' son—used to climb. Correction: I used to climb it. Nat would only heave himself up onto the first limb, a low-hanging thing, and dangle a leg, pretend he was king of the hill or some kind of daring Peter Pan, even though he climbed no farther. A plump redhead two years younger

than me, Nat was an incredibly chicken kid. Once I learned what the term queer meant, I figured him for one. That's what they called them back then. Gay, now. A much prettier word.

But he wasn't, I guess. Who knows or cares? Turns out he became an artist. A damned successful one too. Mom kept track of his career and announced every new mention of his name in the papers. Nat was no favorite with her, but she likes to tell me about anyone from my growing-up days who's even remotely successful. Weird thing is, if I make a move, announce I'm thinking of going to California as Nat did, her eyes bug out and, next-thing, her doctor has ordered some new test she has to undergo. She wants me wildly successful at something, but safely living in the next room.

Though she doesn't know it, I am successful, if not wildly or publicly so. I have a feel for the market like a magician has for a marked deck of cards. I've got nearly two million dollars and don't even pay rent. I've made good, conservative investments too. If I wanted, I could be one of those money-management gurus on the radio. Get thousands of people to subscribe to my newsletter. But I don't want. I appreciate my simple life.

Unlike Nat. He's one of those artists to the "stars"—Hollywood stars. And his name isn't Nat Whitty anymore. His real name was Ignatius, after Loyola—his dad being a devout Catholic and all. We in the neighborhood, growing up, called him Nat, and I always spelled it in my head g-n-a-t because he was a pest—a Me-Me-Me type, despite his yellow streak, always in your face, wanting attention. He peed in my swimming pool once, one of those blow-up things. No control. Couldn't climb his own pecan tree past the first limb, and yet he climbed his way out of this neighborhood, out of this town, clear to L.A.

Now his name is Nathan, not Ignatius. Nathan Whitty. Nat Whitty sounded too much like "not witty" for his taste, I guess, and he was nothing if not witty, though his brand of humor mostly gave me the creeps. Hollywood types eat up that kind of thing, once they decide you're cool.

So the mini-bulldozer was now going after Nat's old house, and I couldn't help wondering how "Nathan," if he knew it, would feel. But he was long gone, had long since ditched this place. "Artist to the movie stars," Mother would remind me. He's a sculptor, to be precise—mainly glories in gigantic pop-sculptures of common objects like paper clips, corkscrews, but then started doing super-realistic portrait busts and life-sized dog and cat portraits in the round, using some kind of resin or plastic material.

The dog and cat portraits are what caught the eye of those movie stars. Their pets are like surrogate selves that simply must

be immortalized. He also does a fanciful set of outsized Oscar statues, each one clothed in different togs. There's a hippie, tie-dyed Oscar, a tuxedoed Oscar, an Oscar in Speedos, a James-Dean Oscar. You get the drift.

During the bulldozing of the Whittys' old house, Mom showed more interest in the outside world than she had in years. Off and on she'd be at the blinds, sliding one slat up, telescoping an eye out through the chink. "Serves them right," she said at the end of the first day. "Those Whittys. That brassy woman."

Mom had forgotten all about the Graces, the quiet Graces who'd lived there much longer than the Whittys ever did. The destruction of the house next door she viewed only in terms of being the destruction of the Whittys' house, mainly of Hetty Whitty's den of iniquity. Mrs. Whitty was, I have to admit, a brassy woman, uninhibited, and definitely out of place in our conventional neighborhood. In an uninhibited mood of her own, Mom once called Mrs. Whitty a one-woman red light district. Back then, I didn't know what that meant, but it didn't sound very complimentary.

It was commonly known that once Hetty Whitty's husband, Ted, left for work in the morning—he ran a grocery his father had built up, and he stayed there until all hours of the night—Mrs. Whitty was on the loose. No man was safe. If the Whitty house had plumbing difficulties or electrical malfunctions, the service trucks remained parked outside for much longer than a normal house call. The pest control guy just about lived there. You can bet the Whittys had no roaches; nothing crawling on six or eight legs had a chance. When business didn't come to the Whitty home, Hetty went on the prowl in search of business. She'd dress to the nines, as my mother called it, and set off for town, high heels clicking on the sidewalk.

Nat knew. I'm sure he did. He'd come home from school and find the house locked against him half the time. You couldn't exactly call him a latchkey kid, because his mother wouldn't give him a key. Either his mom was out, or she was in, still entertaining a workman caller.

Once I saw Nat standing in his back yard, wrapped up in his mom's fake mink stole. He pranced around in it, dipping one shoulder, then the other. From time to time, he'd dress in her housecoats and come outside. I guess that's when I figured he was queer. But Mom has informed me that Nat—Nathan—has been married and divorced twice and has one daughter by his first wife.

Nat's father was the quietest man I ever saw, quieter even than the Graces. He was always at the grocery, and when he came

home, you wouldn't even know it. Rarely, I'd see him in the back yard, walking from the house to the garage. He always seemed to be glancing around like a newcomer, as if trying to reacquaint himself with his own property.

So there they were: the dominating, brassy mother and the quiet, mostly absent father. No wonder Nat couldn't climb a tree, never learned how to throw a baseball or catch a fish. I saw him try to hang a cat once, off his back stoop. The cat lived, but years later, once I'd read up on such things, whenever I thought of Nat, I thought that maybe he would become a serial murderer. He fit the profile.

Instead, he became this faddish cat-and-dog portrait artist to the stars, married twice, and fathered a daughter, which is more than I can say I've ever done.

The foundation for the home next door, once poured, molded up into the strangest shape I've ever seen for a home. A hexagon. Not a large hexagon either, but at least a quarter smaller than the original house. The plumbing pipes, which were few, stuck up toward the back of the foundation. One opening, clearly meant for a toilet, confused me. I guessed it was near the intended master bedroom, but oddly enough, it was very close to the pipes that appeared to be for the kitchen sink. I saw nothing resembling a bath drain. There was no rhyme or reason to those pipes.

I asked one of the cement finishers if he knew who'd bought the property. He wagged his head no.

Next came the framers. Instead of wood, steel I-beams were dropped off by a gigantic truck one Thursday morning. "Steel-beam construction," said the foreman, a guy with crinkly eyes and yellow teeth. "That's the latest thing. Termite-proof. A house with steel-beam construction can last a thousand years."

I enjoyed walking past the place each day, before I set off on my longer walks, up and down the streets of my well-beloved/detested neighborhood. I asked the steel-beam guy who the new owner was. He couldn't say either.

As I watched this strange home going up, I became more keenly aware of how much our neighborhood had changed from the time when Dad still lived with us. Back then, there would have been other fathers, even mothers, who'd take a walk in the evening and pass a new house under construction, show some curiosity. But now, only a few people came, most of them only on the day the slab was poured. One guy from down the block—of Chinese extraction, Mr. Ho—passed by when the front door was put in. He said he'd never seen a door like that in Arizona before,

with a pointy top. Sure enough, the door was pointy, like in a Gothic church. It was black, made of steel. The back door was identical.

After the foundation hardened, Mother lost interest. Now and then she'd say, "I wonder how Hetty would like this place?" or "I wonder if Hetty is still alive"; then she'd go right back to her TV shows. Those programs must deliver more nutritious food for the soul than her church, because she can find any excuse in the world to miss church, but to miss her favorite soap opera would be a sin.

Once the steel beams were in place, I saw that this would be a one story house with very high ceilings—twelve foot at least. From every side of the hexagon, the steel roof beams slanted upwards to meet each other, about twenty feet above the center of the structure, though stopping short of joining in a point. The foreman told me that the very top would accommodate a thick, two hundred-pound, polished, pointed hexagon of glass that would allow diffused light to bathe the interior—the latest thing in terms of guiding natural light into a structure. When I remarked that most skylights leak, he swore the method of laying in that chunk of glass was foolproof, making a perfect seal that would last as long as the Egyptian pyramids.

Around then Mother started to wonder what kind of brick would be used on the outside. "Has the brick come yet?" she'd ask. "What color is it? I hope not blond, or pink. There's that pink brick fad going on. Or white. I hope nothing too light. It hurts my eyes."

No brick was ever delivered. Mother could rest easy about the new house being clad in anything too blindingly white. Instead, thick sheets of black, gold-flecked granite arrived. I couldn't believe my eyes when this stuff started going up. The granite sheets were attached to the steel beams with special rivets. Don't know how they managed it, but the walls looked like one seamless piece of granite.

"How unusual," Mother said, when the side of the house that faced our living room window—the TV room, where she does most of her living—began to go up.

"Yeah, unusual," I said.

"I like the color. At night it will be just like there's no house there, like an empty lot."

Mr. Ho strolled by in short sleeves and flip-flops and also said, "Unusual. This I don't see so much, this type building."

"Unusual," I repeated. "Not exactly in character with the rest of the neighborhood."

"Or any neighborhood." Mr. Ho chuckled, shoved his hands in

his pockets, and rocked back on his heels. He nodded in approval. "Low maintenance," he said.

"True. No gutters to get clogged—no gutter cans."

"Beautiful," said Mr. Ho.

It was beautiful, in a very low-profile, understated way. The place, in its self-effacing blackness, was a residential version of a stealth bomber, or a more visible, aboveground Vietnam Memorial.

"You know owner?" asked Mr. Ho.

I shrugged. "Guess he'll turn up one of these days."

The supervisor of the group that fastened all that black granite onto the outside also didn't know the owner's name; at least, he wasn't telling.

Next you'd expect to see the Sheetrock guys, but no Sheetrock was ever delivered. The men who showed up were marble workers. From what I could see of the action, the interior walls were of marble, milky white. There were no windows—or, let's say, only pretend windows, recessed, but covered with that black granite sheeting on the outside. I wondered if that was against code. I also wondered why I hadn't seen any building inspectors. Maybe the owner was so rich, he'd paid them off—not unheard of in our town.

Since there were no windows, the only source of light came from the opening at the very top center. One day a huge crane trundled down our street, bringing a few more vacant-eyed neighbors around to investigate; the huge chunk of pointy glass was placed, like a crystal stopper, plugging up the big hole at the roof's center.

"Looks like a frigging mausoleum," Mr. Heffington from three houses down crabbed to me. He was walking his snarling black poodle, the only miniature poodle I've ever seen with a pit bull's disposition.

"Ooh, so modern! I wonder what the landscaping will be like," Mrs. Farmer enthused. She'd come out of her house for the first time in ages, easing herself along with her walker. But once the landscaping began, Mrs. Farmer did not put in a second appearance to appraise its merits.

The landscaping was nothing much, just a Bermuda grass lawn sodded front and back and serviced twice a month. In place of flower beds, rock gardens bordered the front walkway on either side and circled the entire hexagon.

"I don't believe these people have children," Mom said one day, peeking between the blinds after her two o'clock soap. "That doesn't look like a child-friendly yard. I just hope they don't put

a basketball hoop out front. I can't bear that bouncing, bouncing, bouncing."

I agreed with Mom that no children would be showing up. That made me happy; I hate noise. I was also glad to see that they, whoever they were, weren't putting in a pool. Noise wrecks my concentration, and in the mornings when I check my stocks on the Internet, I don't need distractions.

The house went up in two months, finished just before Thanksgiving. It would have gone up even faster, one of the workers told me, but there had been a wait between deliveries of the Carrara marble that completed the walls and floors inside. He also confided that the pipes for the toilet and sink had been sawed down and marbled over. He talked like a ventriloquist, as if afraid to be seen. "Ain't no plumbing at all," he said. "I heard tell they just stuck those pipes in the slab for the neighbors' benefit, when the walls wasn't up yet."

I was intrigued, drawn by the mystery. Nothing this interesting had happened on our street in years. I'd try to picture who would move in, but no matter what type of person or couple I imagined living in that place, none made sense. A young, artsy couple? But no artsy types would lay out big bucks for a place this strange in such a blah neighborhood. Somewhere else, maybe, in another town; but not here, at the end of a dead-end street.

I always came back to Nat Whitty. The idea grew. The owner *had* to be Nat, though why he'd want to return to this town, I couldn't fathom. For weeks after the last worker left, the building just stood there, like a great big slab of negative matter or a black hole in space. Waiting.

My sister visited for two days over Christmas, bringing along her husband and three sons. The boys decided those black granite walls were perfect for pounding a soccer ball against. Five minutes after play began, a security company car pulled up. The place must've been rigged with silent alarms. The boys were warned off the property.

"What is that thing next door?" Sis asked. "A house? Does anyone *live* there? Where are the Graces?"

I was never good at answering a chain of questions, so I let these pass without remark. For that matter, Sis was never terribly invested in answers, either.

"I can't believe that place," she said.

"I wonder what Hetty would say," my mother said.

"Who?" Sis asked.

"You remember the Whittys? That floozy, Hetty? Their son Nathan, he's that artist to the stars."

"Oh, right. That awful pop art guy. I'd forgotten."

"He's rich," said Mom. "Makes millions off those stars. He's the most famous person to come out of this town."

Sis laughed. "All I remember about Nat is, once I saw him outside wearing his mother's nightgown! The nightgown wasn't flannel either. Far from it."

Mom's chuckle set the loose skin at her throat all aquiver. "I doubt flannel ever touched Hetty's skin. Unless she had a lumberjack over for tea."

"Well it's too bad the boys can't even bounce a ball over there," said Sis.

"It is private property," I pointed out, just to get on Sis's nerves. My respect for the new owner had grown ever since the security detail had shown up. There would be no noise from kids playing in the future, and my upstairs room overlooked the Whittys' old house. It would be like living next to nobody, as good as if I'd purchased the land myself.

I wanted to add, "Little Nat Whitty is the new owner"—though I didn't know that for a fact. Not yet.

But I had no doubt. Only Nat would have the means or inclination to execute such an outlandish project, purchase the house where he grew up—or let's say, made a hash of growing up—and erect this monument to that sorry event. I just knew, even before Nat emerged from a ruby red limo on Valentine's Day, that he had to be the creator of the black wonder next door.

The limo left immediately, not wanting to call attention to itself, I guess. Nat, or Nathan now, had been dropped off. I just happened to be clipping up the street after my usual rounds of the neighborhood, when I saw a man clothed in a shimmering camel-colored suit that, closer inspection revealed, had flecks of icy blue in the material. The guy held a champagne bottle by the neck in one hand and a large, unlit Coleman lantern in the other. He was facing the black house, head cocked back, seeming to admire the slope of its gleaming roof.

"Nat?" I called, breaking into a jog, unwilling to let this chimera disappear. If the hexagon was Nat's doing, he might only visit once a year for all I knew. He sure wasn't planning to move into a house with no windows in the least interesting town in the state. If I missed him now, my curiosity might not get satisfied for another year. I couldn't bear the thought.

The figure turned, squinted, bent its knees slightly. "Jeremy?" he said. "Jer, you old ghost from the past. Don't tell me you still live here?"

"It is I," I said, wanting to sound Shakespearean—so embarrassed was I that, yes, I still lived in the house I'd first come to as a baby.

The formal, somewhat ghostly tone of my voice might possibly make that fate sound more like a literary curiosity than a pathetic fact.

I sensed that he wanted to bolt to the door and let himself in, that it was taking an incredible amount of willpower on his part to stand there and be talked to by me.

As I drew closer, I also saw that he fairly sparkled. Gone was the baby fat, replaced by a slim, muscular frame. Gone also the copper-colored hair, replaced by gelled locks of finely-dyed silver, a nice solution for a redhead, whose hair usually turns early in life anyway. In his presence I became uncomfortably aware of my male-patterned baldness and slight, unathletic paunch.

Nat was two years younger than I, but despite the silver hair, he looked more than ten years my junior. I remember wanting to ask, What are you—a vampire? You keep young by sucking the blood of twenty-somethings, and this granite monument is where you plan to store fresh victims?

Nat broke the awkwardness by saying, "Here I am again. Ever stoking the dying embers of hearth and home."

"Lantern and all," I said, eyeing the thing in his hand.

"Oh, this. The power isn't flowing yet, you know."

Small wonder. No electrician had ever set foot inside.

He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and thumbed in some numbers. "Sixty minutes, Chad. Okay?" he rasped into its innards. Clicking off, he said, "Just came to check on things, make sure my plans have been carried out." He lifted the champagne. "I'm ready to christen the place." He snickered, and at the sound, despite his new, sleek chassis, I pictured the plump kid he once was, the wannabe Peter Pan, leg dangling from the first limb of the pecan tree.

As if he'd read my thoughts, to pound the ball back at me, he said, "But why are you still here? Nowheresville. Gracious goodness, Jer. Why are you still here?"

"Mother," I said, then rushed to add, "Looks are deceiving. I'm doing all right. But Mom, she needs care. So here I am. I'm an investment broker, and you can do that from a tree, even, if you've got a computer. I'm doing well. Very well."

"Mom's got you by the balls, eh? But not Sis. I'll bet Sis is free as a—*an* aardvark." He had to be different like that. Not say a bird, but an aardvark.

I sputtered a surprised laugh, decided to go for his own Achilles heel. "And your mom? Is Miss Hetty still with us, still depending on the kindness of strangers?"

"Still going strong." He laughed. "Would you believe, she's in a nursing home, and she's got three of those randy codgers on a

string." He acted proud. He'd never seemed especially proud of Miss Hetty's conquests back when he was eleven, hanging around the back door, waiting to be let in.

"A nursing home?" I displayed mock concern. "She's all right, still able to get around?"

"Fine, fine." His blue eyes glittered in the dusky light. "She's only there because I can't very well keep an eye on her. Has that brittle bone thing, and I'd hate to have her fall. Gets the best of care. Very spry. Still the lovely beauty she always was."

I'd never thought her a beauty. Neither had Dad, though Mom feared Dad was one of Hetty's conquests. "Not my type," Dad told me once when we both happened to see Miss Hetty at her front door, all dolled up, waving goodbye to the bug man. Strange thing to say to a ten year old, but I believed him. Still do. After Nat's nearly invisible father kicked off from a heart attack, Miss Hetty was always asking Dad to come over. She'd ask him to change a light bulb, fix a leaky faucet. "He's a gem," she'd declare to Mom afterwards. Mom soon put her foot down and told Dad he couldn't help Miss Hetty anymore. She didn't trust that woman.

"She isn't even my type," I remember him telling Mother then. Mom said, "Well, who is?" Without words—and I'm sure of this—Dad said, "Not you." He didn't need words. He answered that one six months later with action, when he ran off with his new wife-to-be, who was nothing like Miss Hetty or Mom. I guess they had a pretty good life of it, until Dad passed on. What I hold against Miss Hetty is, well, I feel she's the one I can thank for taking my dad away because it wasn't until Mom put her foot down about Dad going over there that Dad felt the need to get the hell out. If it hadn't been for Miss Hetty and her light bulbs, Dad might have stuck it out here another ten years.

It was at this point that Nat seized my arm and gave it a manly squeeze. "Look," he said. "I've got to inspect this place. Cross my heart, I'll give you the grand tour one of these days, but my driver's picking me up in, golly, less than thirty minutes. See ya soon, Jer. And you might do me a favor. Don't mention seeing me. The whole celebrity thing, I don't thrive on that. Believe it or not, it's a colossal drag. A lot of horsey manure. But give your mom my best. Only, I'd rather you not mention, you know, my being here. The rest of these folks, they don't know from nothing. But you could set off a firestorm. Like, a bunch of paparazzi camping outside your door. Better not mention me to anyone."

And so I didn't. Nat was overestimating the extent of his own

celebrity. Even so, why test his hypothesis? I like quiet. I didn't want to give up any portion of it, not even for a day, on account of Nat Whitty.

I watched out my window an hour later. The red limo pulled up. Nat got in, winged back to his movie stars.

Mom soon forgot about the new house. Even Mr. Ho didn't stroll by anymore. Now and then a passing car slowed. The rock gardens and Bermuda grass prospered under the care of two Hispanic guys who showed up twice a month. They drove a green truck with a leafy motif painted on its sides and the words GARDENS OF EDEN—a national lawn maintenance chain, I later learned. The few confused leaves that blew onto Nat's property from trees farther down the street were blasted away by industrial-sized blowers. Nobody rakes anymore, except me. Leaves aren't picked up and bagged; they just get blown from one property to another, most destined to clog catch basins.

A month later, six months since construction began, a moving van showed up. The red limo soon snaked in behind it. I was just then starting my afternoon walk. Nat emerged from the limo, this time wearing a body-hugging, powder-blue jumper that functioned as his work clothes.

Two men began offloading a long rectangular shape—a sofa, I thought. Hard to tell, it was wrapped in so much plastic. Long like a sofa and, from the looks on the guys' faces, heavy. From what I could see of it through the wrappings, the object was white. Nat's normally shiny, unwrinkled face was screwed up with worry and fear, as if the men who struggled under the thing's weight were carrying a precious heirloom they might bop against the jamb of the front gate. Don't know which he was more concerned about, the sofa or the gate. In the previous week, a black, six-foot-tall, see-through iron fence had gone up. Elegant and expensive, it encircled the entire property. Since completion, the gate had been closed and locked, until now.

Once they maneuvered through that opening, Nat followed them to the pointy-topped front door, and worried the sofa thing through that passage also.

When they trooped back out to retrieve the next piece of furniture, this one also wrapped in thick plastic—a big white recliner, my guess—I was already waiting for Nat at the new gate, inspecting its heavy-duty hinges.

"Looks like moving day," I called as he approached.

He nodded, acknowledging my uninvited existence. With the grace of one used to making easy transitions between social personas, the worried frown vanished and a mask of cool certainty

reigned. "Watch it with these next two, guys," he said. "They're a tad more delicate."

"Just a few items," he said, turning to me with a satisfied smile. "Then I jet back to Neverland."

"That's all? Must be pretty sparse in there." I tried to focus on what the men were carrying in next—two smaller objects. They looked like statues, but I couldn't make out their shapes under all that wrapping.

"You must have noticed by now," said Nat. "This isn't an ordinary house." He stepped back to admire his hexagon. Its gold-flecked blackness gleamed in the late afternoon light, and even picked up a dull red from the setting sun.

"It is pretty beautiful," I said, gauging his expression as I offered this bit of flattery. A slight positive lift in his eyes and posture told me he'd entered the eager listener mode. I ventured further. "It reminds me of that stuff the scientists talk about—anti-matter."

"Good, good. That's a nice analogy."

"It also reminds me of a stealth bomber, or the Vietnam Memorial." Had I gone one remark too far?

He folded his arms. "Well, stealth is an intelligent strategy, *mais non*? And this is a memorial, in a way. But Jer, let me toss all my cards on the table and say, just between you and me, this is—how can I put it? First off, I'm an artist you know, and I've had some success . . ."

"I know, I know. Mom follows your career. She's always reporting to me." I laughed as if pleased with his success, not at all threatened by it in relation to my own standing in the world.

"Well, you know that in art, as in life, a certain amount of pandering goes on." He struck his chest a blow with the flat of his talented right hand. "Guilty! I have been guilty of pandering to a certain taste. Gotta pay the bills, right? So this place, you might think of as my own personal gallery. A reward to myself."

The two movers passed between us hauling another object. Looked like a long, low table, also white.

Nat followed with his eyes as the men entered the building, but continued talking. "There's work I want to do that's just for me, that the rest of the world won't be terribly interested in."

"Personal stuff?"

"Right. Though in spite of that, I think what I've produced, what I'm displaying in there, is universal. My humble opinion, of course. But it recently dawned on me how lucky I am to be in a position to do something I doubt any other artist in the history of art has, uh, had the means to accomplish. To have his own private gallery for his own private art, to be enjoyed by his

own private self. Artists have their studios of course." He waved a dismissive hand. "But this is different—unique."

"Sure is." I sent the building another admiring stare. "Wish I could see the inside, and your art."

The movers stood before us with empty hands. "Want us to unwrap that stuff too?" one asked.

"No boys. That's my job. Thanks, fellas. For being gentle." He barked a laugh, as if his concern for the furniture had been an act. Then he shut the gate and locked it, with me on the outside.

"I'd be glad to help with the unwrapping," I said.

"Nice offer, but this is my baby. Sculptors are very hands-on people. I do it my way." He sang the last five words, gayly tossing off a bad Sinatra impression as he started up the concrete walkway to the front door.

I hated for this chance to slip by. I blurted out: "How come there's no electricity?"

He faced me, beamed a magnanimous smile, walking backwards. "Don't need it. Can't beat natural light."

I wanted to ask about the plumbing too, but he'd already skipped inside and shut the door.

I went ahead with my usual walk, disgusted with myself for being so curious. Why should I give a rat's ass about seeing the inside of that place, or viewing what silly Nat Whitty considered his most authentic artistic statement?

Later, when I finally rounded the corner and my own redbrick house came into view again, I'd convinced myself that even if Nat invited me, I'd say, "Some other time." But how my heart sank when I saw that the ruby limo was gone. The plastic had been left behind in the gutter, tied in neat round bales.

About a month after that meeting, Nat once again chose the hour before dusk to pay another call. This time he showed up in a rental car. I saw him inching up the walkway, steering his mother along by the elbow. At the sight of Miss Hetty, even this severely revised and sagging version, thirty years dropped off my soul. I was a boy again, full of wonder at the phenomenon of what others in my little world agreed was a bona fide sexy woman, a mother who wore knit tops that showed off cleavage of remarkable dimensions even during the daylight hours, all while trailing a certain perfumey scent that my mother called Chanel Number Heinz 57.

"Miss Hetty," I said, bowing from the waist like a numbskull courtier, as if she were a significant elder goddess. Getting a close-

up view, though, I was saddened to see, instead of the fleshy bunched-up line between her formerly warring breasts, a bowed-out, ruddy-hued breastbone, the cleavage's demarcation line having long since descended to unmentionable nether regions.

"Miss Hetty!" I repeated, regaining my balance, checking the tears that sprang to my eyes. I felt grateful that Mom was inside taking a nap. I didn't relish the thought of her rehashing the indignities "that woman" had subjected us to back when she crowned my dad her premier handyman.

"Can it be?" Miss Hetty said. "The little Winston boy!"

"Jeremy Winston. The very same." Nat's face was expressionless, but I gathered that he wished I wasn't there.

His mother straightened her spine. "Where's your dad? Is he still about?"

"Dad died, going on seven years." I assumed a proper hangdog expression and saw no reason to add that he'd left us long before that.

Her tongue made a clucking noise and her posture slumped in profound disinterest, now that she knew Dad would not be changing so much as a fuse in her fuse box ever again.

Then she suddenly perked up. As I put my hand out for a shake, she dug one of her clawed hands into my collarbone and reeled me in for the most death-defying hug I've ever endured. "The little Winston boy, the little Winston boy," she kept saying. "All grown up."

That was enough to start me stepping backwards toward my own house, despite my curiosity.

"Just showing Mother the place," Nat said.

"Nat's sprung me from that hellhole," Miss Hetty said. "I always knew he'd come back for his dear old mom."

Nat patted her head and rolled his eyes at me. He chuckled. "It's not really a hellhole, Mother."

"My son the artist," said Miss Hetty. "Who would have thought? He's a genius, a millionaire. Ain't life a hoot?" Nat locked the gate behind him and began leading her up the walkway.

"Life's a hoot, all right," I said, issuing Miss Hetty a valedictory wave.

"Don't let's stay too long though, son," I heard her say. "Jim and Bill, they'll wonder where I am. And Rocco. Isn't Rocco a sweetie?"

"I sprung you, Mother. Remember? You're not going back there."

"Oh, right. We're going to Hollywood." She waved at me again. "My son's taking me to live in Hollywood! I'll meet a whole 'nother class of people."

"That's great, Miss Hetty," I called. "That's swell."

Sex and Death struck me as being so gruesomely conjoined in this final edition of Miss Hetty Whitty that I felt glad to get back inside my bedroom afterwards, where nothing ever changes. The walls are a light tan, clean and blank, except for the bulletin board over my desk.

That night from my window I saw a yellow glow projecting up and out of the pointed glass peak. I wondered why Nat was still there, with his high-powered lantern; what could he possibly be showing off to his mother? The few pieces he'd moved in there didn't warrant lengthy inspection. If his plan was to take her to California, why weren't they gone by now? Maybe he'd only brought her to see his most personal artworks, and then he planned to dump her back in the hellhole with Jim, Bill, and Rocco. Whatever the answers, I had no inclination to tell Mom about Nat's private gallery or that Miss Hetty had visited.

The next day I saw no one go in or out. Clearly, Miss Hetty had not taken up residence. How could she? No electricity, no plumbing. That afternoon, a storm moved through, one with heavy rain, unusual for these parts.

"The Whitty house is pretty in the rain," Mom said. She'd managed to lift herself off the sofa after her two o'clock soap to peek out the window.

"It's not theirs anymore, Ma," I said. "The Whittys haven't lived here for years, in case you didn't notice."

She glared at me. "I'm fully aware of that, Jeremy. You needn't sound so harsh and know-it-all."

"Sorry." I moved toward the staircase, eager for the peace of my room.

"Did you happen to find that tuna at the grocery?" she asked. "That Safeway tuna, packed in water. It's cheaper and just as good. Last time you got Chicken of the Sea."

I stopped, hand on the bannister. "No, Mom. I couldn't find Safeway tuna, like I couldn't find it for the last five years. I'd have to go clear across town to Safeway and pay more in gas than the pennies cheaper it might be. And we can well afford to buy the most expensive tuna going if we want."

She giggled. A perverse giggle is how I'd characterize it. She said, "You might afford it if you were artist to the stars like Nat Whitty, but you don't even have a job."

I'd given up trying to explain that I didn't have to work like other people, that I'd invested the money I'd saved over the years, and later, a bigger chunk Dad left me. The woman simply has no idea that I'm rich. Instead of arguing, I just stood there, gripping

the bannister, counting to ten. I count a lot—perhaps the most elementary anger management strategy of all time.

I eased up the stairs, and she tossed another question at me. "Who does live there now? Who bought that place?"

I'd been wondering when she'd ever ask. In a way, her lack of curiosity has been more infuriating than her quest for the cheapest canned tuna.

"I don't know, Ma," I said. "No one lives there."

"No one?" She sounded incredulous.

I'd paused on the stairs and could hear her thinking, though I couldn't see her. I really didn't want her to get too inquisitive about the place now, didn't want her to know Nat Whitty had built his own private gallery next door. "Doesn't matter," I said.

"No one lives there," she repeated, the amazement in her voice a bit dimmer. Next thing I heard was the electronic pop of the TV's ON button. The volume ratcheted up.

In my room, I watched the storm play itself out against Nat's gallery. Rain streamed down the granite roof and walls in smooth, glistening sheets. Once the downpour ended, lightning still arced in the distance. Those brief flashes illuminated the droplets that quivered and clung to the roof. Countless diamonds scattered across black granite, a vision as rich with mystery as the star-spangled universe.

Months passed. The black house sat. I waited.

"Nathan Whitty is having a one-man show in New York in early June," Mother told me, speaking into the newspaper at breakfast. "An important gallery. The show's title is 'Multidimensional Dilemmas.'"

That explained his absence. Nat was gearing up for a show. After opening night, he would return to reap more personal aesthetic sustenance from a fresh viewing of his private gallery, I felt sure. Perhaps he would even install new pieces. By mid June, I began listening for the roar of a moving truck on our street again. This time, once the gate and huge Gothic doors swung open, I would find some way to get the look inside that Nat had promised me.

But the day Nat came back, I did not see him arrive. The limo must have dropped him off while I was visiting Mom in the hospital. She'd developed a clot in her leg, the result of inactivity, the doctor said. She needed a few days of observation and a course of blood thinners, and then she could set up shop again on our living room sofa.

It was a Sunday night, June ninth. I got home from the hospital around seven, heated the spaghetti, ate at the kitchen table, savoring the rare solitude that comes with a silent TV. I didn't notice anything

different about the house next door until I went upstairs and glanced out my window. The glass stopper at the roof's peak emitted a familiar yellow glow.

Before my eyes, the glow dimmed. Nat was leaving, but not by the front door. Since our house juts out farther in the rear than does Nat's place, I could see his back door from my window. A figure holding a lantern emerged. Nat walked to the pecan tree and paused. I soon knew what he was doing. No plumbing, after all. He was taking a leak.

Fearing he might see me framed in the window, I pulled away, switched off the light. Edging back to my viewing post, I saw him stand about a minute longer, gazing at the stars; it was a clear night.

He reentered his mausoleum, and the yellow glow filled the glass pyramid again. A dim yellow light also showed through the back door, indicating he'd left it open, probably to get some air circulating inside.

Quick, I made it down the stairs; stepped out into the balmy June night—didn't want this chance to pass me by. I hoped Nat hadn't locked the gate. Sure enough, it gave when I pushed down on the fancy brass handle.

Once inside the yard, I felt less sure about my next move. Knock at the door? I didn't like the idea. Then I remembered the open back door. Why not saunter up like a good neighbor paying a call. I could poke my head in the opening, say, "Halloo, anybody home?" as Dad sometimes did on a summer night if a neighbor was working late on a project in his garage. Nat wouldn't like this, but at worst he'd just tell me to leave. Still, I might catch a glimpse, might never have this chance again.

But when I craned my neck around the door jamb and peered inside, I forgot my original intention of issuing a warning hello. Before me, at the center of the single huge six-sided room, was a tableaux so strange—no matter how cozily domestic—I could not bring myself to break the spell.

The figures and the furniture they occupied were all a crepuscular white. At the center stood a coffee table, Early American traditional. At one end sat a white recliner. The figure lounging in it with his feet up was an adult male reading a newspaper—the father, Mr. Whitty, I immediately knew. His head had the same bullet shape. The sofa, on the other side of the coffee table, facing me, was placed catty-cornered to the recliner. The female figure on it was also in a comfortable pose, legs up, upper body propped against pillows. Her legs and most of her body were covered with the white afghan she was knitting. To be precise, she had paused in the midst of knitting, held the needles in one hand while the

other, in a gesture of maternal love, rested on the head of a boy who was kneeling on the floor, frozen in the act of shooting a marble at a circle of marbles arranged a few feet from the coffee table. The woman was Mrs. Whitty, I had no doubt, though I was about twenty feet away and I'd never seen Miss Hetty knit so much as a potholder in my life.

I took two steps inside to grab a better look, despite the fact that Nat himself was standing just a bit off to the right of this sculpture group, his back to me. He held the lantern, and its slight swaying sent eerie shadows across the figures, making them seem even more lifelike.

"You shouldn't creep up on a fella that way, Jer," Nat said, without turning.

I stayed where I was, frozen like a member of the sculpture group before me—my role, the visiting playmate. "S-s-sorry," I said. I meant to back out, but took two more steps closer. "I, I just saw the light, and I wondered if maybe—maybe someone had broken in." I glanced around at the white marble walls, what I could see of them in the shadows. "Wow, this is beautiful."

Nat turned and looked straight at me. The expression on his face wasn't anger, exactly, or annoyance, or fear, or embarrassment. I felt that I was staring into the eyes of a very intelligent creature who was thinking, thinking, calmly thinking, what to do with me, like a chess master chasing out the consequences of several possible moves in his mind.

I said, "You promised me the grand tour. Remember? I heard about the New York show. Great success, Mom said."

Nat raised the lantern higher and ambled toward the happy little family. He beckoned me to enjoy a closer look.

"That's your dad," I said, trying to keep the creepiness I felt out of my voice. "What an amazing likeness. What is this stuff? Like a plastic resin, or plaster?"

"A plastic-based medium I invented myself. Practically indestructible."

The likeness was uncanny, though I must admit, I never saw Mr. Whitty up close very often—he spent so much time at the grocery. He had a nice smile on his face, as if what he was reading in the paper, held up before him in both hands, was amusing. The funny pages? He wore a polo shirt and slacks and slippers on his feet which were crossed at the ankles. Moving closer, I saw another figure that I hadn't noticed before. A dog, asleep beneath the coffee table.

"I don't remember that you had a dog," I said.

"We didn't." Nat's tone was alarmingly clipped.

My throat felt dry when I swallowed. He moved the lantern to

illuminate the mother. The boy whose head she caressed was clearly Nat himself, without the plumpness he had as a child—an idealized portrait of the Nat who might have been, a Nat who might have been brave enough to climb to the top of the pecan tree, if he'd only had a dog and a dad who didn't work all hours, and a mother who didn't entertain plumbers and the bug man while he was off at school.

But the most impressive figure was Miss Hetty. As I stuck my head out near hers to get a better look, I sucked in my breath. Her face was too lifelike. In a flash, I knew.

Mr. Whitty and the boy were fine replicas, but this was Miss Hetty herself. Nat had encased his mom in his favorite sculpting material, smoothed out the wrinkles in her face and hands to make her look like the thirtyish woman I remembered. No cleavage in this version. He'd covered up most of the rest of her with the white plastic afghan, her knitting.

Don't let on you know, I told myself, afraid my knees might buckle. But that single sucked-in breath had already given me away.

"When I was little, I always wanted to know where she was," Nat said coolly. "And now, finally, I do."

I straightened up, nodding.

"I don't like to think of art as therapy," he added. "But it's been therapeutic. Very much so."

"The perfect nuclear family." I affected a breezy tone. I laughed.

Nat laughed too. "Family values are 'in.'" He laughed some more.

So Nat's house really was a mausoleum. Mr. Heffington had called it that. I'm a tad bigger than Nat, I was thinking, but he's stronger, obviously works out. He had the lantern. If I didn't make it to the door first, I pictured him closing it—with me inside. I could scream for days; no one would hear. No light, no water. I pictured Mr. Heffington walking past, thinking how much like a mausoleum this house looked, little knowing that I was inside, rotting away with Miss Hetty.

I said, carefully measuring my words, "Well, this has been a real honor, a rare treat. Beautiful stuff, Nat. You're every bit the artist the papers say and then some." I started taking a few steps toward the open back door.

"So you think you can just walk out of here? Now?"

"Your secret's safe with me," I said. "Look, I wouldn't mind if you had a spot in this gallery for my mom." I forced another chuckle. "Visiting next-door neighbor."

He smiled, intrigued. "You like the idea? Perpetual care. I've got it all arranged. This place will be taken care of long after I'm gone."

I've set up a trust. If one lawn company goes out of business, the work will go to another. Every eventuality is covered."

"Mom's in the hospital right now, though." I strove to sound conversational, matter-of-fact. "Nothing serious. And we already have a plot in Lakelawn, Mom and me. I think we've got perpetual care too."

Nat let the lantern drop a few inches at his side. "You were lucky," he said. "You had a stay-at-home mom. You always knew where she was."

"Right, and look at me, still here. Ha. Yeah, I always knew exactly where she was—on the sofa watching reruns. You wanted a stay-at-home mom, and I had one, and," I shrugged, "yours was hot to trot, and mine was cold as—as an aardvark. Looks like either way, we both got screwed. Kind of ironic."

Nat lifted the lantern. He had a strange, contracted look on his face. I guess he'd never thought of that before.

"Your secret's safe with me," I repeated. He stepped toward me, and that's when I did it, resorted to the oldest trick in any ten year old's book. Pretending that I'd been startled by some movement, I glanced away from him, straight at Miss Hetty on the sofa. I opened my eyes wide in horror, as if she had suddenly become something much more impressive than merely lifelike. In that second, Nat lost focus. He whipped his head around to see, and I took off. I was already at the door before he was up and running. I rounded the corner like a champ, felt glad for the full moon and that I'd left the gate ajar. I was at my front door by the time he made it to his gate, which I'd slammed behind me.

He stopped at the gate, just stood there, watching me. Breaths coming fast, my hand on the knob, I called to him, "No sweat, Nat Whitty. I won't tell. Honest Injun." My knees were shaking, and the vision of Miss Hetty all dolled up like Beaver's mother was truly a horror and getting to me, but I still laughed at the sound of my own voice, swearing the oath that was so popular when Nat and I were kids—not that I'd ever promised him anything Honest Injun back then.

"I'm supposed to trust *you*?" he said.

"You don't have much choice," I bellowed. "And you might think about this." The words were just coming to me, now that I knew I'd made it, that my sanctuary was waiting for me just inside the door and up the stairs. "Consider this Ga-nat Whitty: 'The fault might lay not in our stars, but in ourselves.'"

"Christ," he said. "Shakespeare, he quotes. You loser. Never even left home. Doesn't even have a job."

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THE JESTER AND THE CAPTAIN

ALAN GORDON

Most people would be alarmed by the sight of a man looking in through their second story window. Most people are not fools, which is fortunate for most people. Those of us unlucky enough to be fools, however, learn to take such appearances in stride. In my case, the apparition in whiteface floating high above street level was a colleague.

"Good morning, Plossus," I said.

"Good morning, Feste," he replied cheerfully.

His use of my Constantinopolitan alias rather than my Guild name let me know that he wasn't alone. I leaned out the window and looked down. Huddled at the base of his stilts was a familiar form in an unfamiliar posture.

"Henry?" I exclaimed.

There was a spiritless wave. I looked back at Plossus.

"I found him like that," he said quietly.

"Where?"

"Near the Forum of Arkadios," he said. "Crumpled in a doorway and crying like a baby who lost his favorite rattle. Hardly what one would expect from a captain of the Varangian Guard."

"Did he tell you what happened?"

"No; but he grabbed me like a drowning man would a lifeline tossed from a boatful of naked virgins and asked me to take him to see you."

"I'm not a naked virgin," I said.

"Well, take your clothes off, and we'll lie about your sordid past," grinned Plossus.

"How long does it take you to fall from this height?" I asked.

He let go of the stilts and jumped backwards, somersaulting twice before landing on the flagstones of the courtyard. The stilts toppled on either side of Henry.

"That long," called Plossus. "Come down and help me get him inside."

"Aglaia," I called into my bedchamber.

My wife poked her head through the doorway. She was midway through applying her whiteface.

"We're having unexpected company," I said. "Henry seems to be in some kind of trouble."

"Henry?" she asked in surprise. "How can someone like him be in trouble?"

"We're about to find out," I said.

By the time I had come down the stairs, Plossus had Henry more or less up. The captain was out of armor, wearing a brown tunic and leggings that would have allowed him to blend into the great crowd of Constantinopolitans that were no doubt bustling through the city streets even as I came to support his other arm. As I did, a dwarf entered the courtyard, took one look at our comrade-in-arms, and began to snicker.

"Great Captain," he said, bowing. "I have seen you quell entire riots single-handedly and look positively unscathed compared to how you look now. I demand the name of your vintner."

"Good morning, Rico," I said. "Come on up. We're having Henry for breakfast."

"I want the liver," said Rico. "It will put me into good humor for a month."

And so the four members of the Fools' Guild residing in the largest city in Europe in that spring of 1203 sat down to their morning meal, joined by a nearly comatose captain.

"What was he doing hanging around Arkadios?" I asked Plossus.

"He wouldn't say," said Plossus.

"And why is he out of armor?" wondered Rico. "Was he spying on someone?"

"He is here, and awake," observed my wife. "Perhaps we should ask him directly. Henry, what happened to you?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "I cannot remember anything since yesterday afternoon. It's a disaster. I should just open a vein and get it over with."

"I've had binges like that," I said sympathetically. "Have a little wine and sleep it off."

"It occurs to me that he's a guard," said Rico. "Shouldn't he be guarding something right now?"

"Have you left the Varangians at last, good Henry?" asked Aglaia.

"I have not left, but I was on leave," he said. "I had three days."

"Starting when?" she asked.

"Two days ago," he said. "I must report back to Hodegon.

Garrison at sunrise tomorrow."

"Then you shall rest here until then," I said. "It's the least we can do."

"I cannot go back," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's gone," he said, putting his face into his hands, but not quickly enough to hide the tears.

We glanced at each other, astonished to see him weep so easily.

"What is gone?" asked Aglaia gently.

"My sash," he said.

"A sash?" laughed Rico. "All this effluent over a strip of cloth? Good God, Captain, pull yourself together. Buy a new one at the market. The city is full of silk—take advantage."

"You don't understand," said Henry. "This is the Varangian sash, the emblem of my rank, the one I have worn since the day it was presented to me by the emperor. It cannot be replaced. To lose it on leave will make me the laughingstock of the men. I will no longer have their respect, and without the respect of the soldiers, the captain must wither and die."

"That's some sash," said Plossus.

"Then we must find it for you, friend Henry," I said.

"You are the only ones who can," said Henry. "I cannot go to the watch. I'd never be able to look them in the eye if I did."

"Who's available?" I asked.

"I am," said Plossus.

"The empress is away for a few days," said Aglaia. "I can help."

"Rico?" I asked.

"With the empress away, the emperor will be wanting entertainment," said Rico. "I have to go to Blachernae this morning. But he should be passed out in the arms of his favorite flutist by noon. Tell me where to meet you."

"At the Bull and Lion," I said. "Let's figure on dining there in the amount of time it takes Rico to walk from Blachernae at noon."

"On those little legs?" protested Plossus. "It will be nightfall."

"Last one there buys," said Rico.

"You're on," said Plossus.

He abruptly leaned toward Henry and sniffed deeply.

"You're a brave man," I said. "How does he smell?"

"Like someone who has been drinking prodigiously," he said. "And like someone who has been in close contact with someone else who was wearing perfume."

"In other words, like a soldier on leave," said Aglaia. "Do you have a regular tavern?"

"Or a regular woman?" asked Rico. "Or at least, a regular place where you buy them?"

"I used to go to the Rooster, as you may remember," said Henry. "But the place has gone to the dogs. I remember going to a tavern near the Forum Bovis."

"Which one?"

"The Two Heads of John."

"I know it well," said Plossus promptly.

"No surprise there," said Rico. "You didn't answer my question."

"No regular woman," said Henry. "No regular brothel."

"What about a regular man?" asked Rico.

"If I wanted a man, there are plenty enough in the guards," said Henry. "No."

"Just thinking about every possibility," said Rico. "Doesn't a typical debauch on leave usually conclude with a trip to a whorehouse?"

"It would not be out of character," confessed Henry.

"We may have to inquire at several," I speculated.

"Captain, we will return wearing your sash or on it," vowed Aglaia, thumping her fist on her chest in salute, then grimacing in mock pain.

We walked down into the courtyard.

"Taverns! Brothels! This is the best mission ever!" crowed Plossus.

"Let's go while Plossus's blood is still hot," I said.

"So nice to be doing a favor for a friend," said Aglaia. "It makes a pleasant change from our regular Guild work. I feel positively noble."

"It may not be such a change," I said. "I had a singularly nasty thought on the way down."

"Only one?" said Rico. "You won't make your quota at that rate."

"I was thinking about the sash," I said. "It's where he wore his medallion. Only a Varangian captain may wear it, and they are specially struck for the Guard. They will grant the bearer access to many strategically important places without challenge."

"That is a singularly nasty thought," said Rico. "Do you think that's what happened to Henry?"

"Like you, I'm just thinking about every possibility," I replied. "It may be that some outsider wants to spy on the local defenses in the guise of a Varangian captain."

"Or it could be someone who wants to discredit Henry," said Aglaia.

"What enemies does he have?" I asked.

"None among the Varangians, as far as I know," said Plossus.

"He's English, but he gets along famously with English, Dane, and Greek alike. But he has had his run-ins with the Imperial Guards. They don't like him much."

"Rico, see what gossip you can pick up at Blachernae while you're there," I said.

"Right," said Rico. "Good hunting. Don't let Plossus into any brothels until I get there. He needs supervision."

He headed north to Blachernae. We followed the Mese to the Forum Amastrianum, then turned to the west and crossed the Forum Bovis.

"The tavern is that way," said Plossus, pointing toward the southern seawall.

"Show us where you first found him," I directed Plossus.

He led us to the Forum of Arkadios, where the giant column perched on the Xerolophon, the Seventh Hill. Halfway down from the forum toward the Port of Theodosios was a maze of alleyways, filled with bakers and sausage-makers. Plossus pointed to a spot between two stalls.

"I was coming by here to pick up some sausages," he said. "Then I saw him."

"Anyone nearby?"

"No."

We looked around. There were no taverns or houses of ill repute in the vicinity.

"There are soldiers who like to spend their leaves eating bread and sausages," Plossus offered.

"Not Henry's style," said Aglaia. "If that's the word I want for drinking and whoring."

"Right," I said. "Time to visit the goldsmith."

"But I wanted to go to the taverns and brothels," protested Plossus.

"Later," I said. "The ladies will still be at their prayers right now."

Aglaia snorted.

The goldsmith I wanted to see was a Hungarian named Emeric. He was known for fashioning pieces of exquisite craft. He was also known for melting down other pieces of exquisite craft, brought to him by the pickpockets loyal to Father Esaias, the master of the criminal underworld in the city. Emeric was a slender, wizened man, with long delicate fingers and a perpetual squint. When Aglaia and I came into his shop, he was bent over his worktable, his stool resting on a metal grill that allowed any gold shavings that fell to be collected easily from under it. He looked up at us in irritation.

"Go away, Fools, unless you're here to buy," he snapped. "I

have no time for idle banter."

"No banter, it is," I said. "We may be in the market for something."

"In that case, welcome to my humble emporium," he said, bowing from the waist without getting up. "How may I be of service?"

"See how quickly the winds change when money is mentioned?" I observed to my wife. "I wish to find something that is worthy of adorning this matchless beauty by my side."

Aglaia giggled and simpered next to me.

"A golden trinket for Milady Fool?" he asked.

"Perhaps," I said. "I was thinking more of something in bronze."

"A medallion, maybe?" added Aglaia. "Something martial. I've always wanted one of those."

"What are you talking about?" he asked slowly. "I work in gold, not bronze."

"In the front of the shop," I agreed. "We're interested in something that may be in the back. Put that away, you're not quick enough to use it well."

He replaced the sword that he had drawn from a scabbard mounted under the table.

"What is it that you really want?" he asked.

"Word has it that a Varangian medallion may be available," I said. "We naturally thought that a specialist in forgery such as yourself might know of its whereabouts. We represent a buyer."

"I know nothing of such matters," he said.

"If you hear of anything, we dine at the Bull and Lion," I said. "Thank you for your time."

"I apologize for my rudeness in drawing my sword," he said. "I should know I have nothing to fear from a pair of fools."

"We were not unduly alarmed," I said.

"Normally, I have my man attend to any matters involving violence," he added.

"What man is that?" asked Aglaia.

A pair of massive hands clamped down on our shoulders. We glanced over them and craned our necks up until we could see the giant who owned the hands.

"That man," said Emeric. "Otto, show them the door."

"I think that's it over there," I said helpfully.

"Yes, we saw it when we came in," added Aglaia.

We saw it again for a moment as we went flying out of it.

"Really, I don't see how he gets any business with that attitude," huffed Aglaia as she got to her feet and rearranged her motley.

"I've been thrown out of better places than that," said Plossus as he came up to join us. "Although I've never been thrown that far."

"Just tell us what you found," I said as we walked back to the Mese.

"Following your instructions, I broke into the back room while you were distracting the goldsmith with your engaging banter," he said. "I searched it until I heard the giant come in, then I cut out. I found nothing. No sash, no medallion, no evidence of anyone forging new medallions."

"Good," I said. "I'm relieved. Let's go back to retracing Henry's steps."

"To do it precisely, we'll have to start drinking now," commented Plossus.

"You and I will go to the Two Heads of John," I said.

"And what shall I do?" asked Aglaia.

"There are four brothels within a short walk of the Forum Bovis," I said. "See what you can find out. Put out the word that there will be a reward."

"How come she gets to go to the brothels?" whined Plossus.

"Because she can get the women to actually talk," I said. "An overly handsome man like you will just have them competing for your favors."

"True enough," he conceded.

"I'll see you at the Bull and Lion," said Aglaia.

The Two Heads of John was named for the competing relics of John the Baptist that had been foisted, at great cost, upon gullible Byzantine royalty. Each had its own adherents, and the contentions of the two groups as to which decaying skull was authentically holy frequently became so heated that they led to violent confrontations in the streets. All in the name of religion, of course.

The tavern took no sides in the great debate, but encouraged free discussion of the issue fueled by less free imbibing. Those who had no opinion at all—indeed, those who were frankly ignorant of the matter entirely—were also welcome to partake. The sign outside showed two grinning skulls eyeing a pair of brimming cups of ale. Plossus paused to glance up at it before we entered.

"I wonder how they manage it," he mused.

"Manage what?" I asked.

"Drinking without hands and arms," he replied. "Or tongues, for that matter."

"Maybe they don't," I said. "Maybe that's why they look so dry."

It was still midmorning, and the place was relatively quiet. There were several tables in no particular pattern, and a long, high counter behind which were several large barrels and a jovial-looking tapster wiping a stack of wooden cups with a towel that actually looked clean.

"Good morning, Plossus," he said. "You're early today. And you've brought the legendary Feste! Welcome, my foolish friends. Would that there was an audience for you."

"Greetings, friend Cyril," said Plossus. "Two of your finest ales and some help, please."

"The ale is easy and excellent," said Cyril, swiping two mugs with his left hand and pouring with a practiced hand. "The help I offer freely, although the quality I cannot vouch for."

"A simple matter," I said. "A friend of ours went drinking and lost something of no value to anyone but himself. A soldier's sash with a medallion. He remembers starting here yesterday afternoon."

"A large Englishman wearing brown?" asked Cyril.

"That's right," I said.

"He drank long and loudly, and paid me in full," said Cyril, looking at us significantly.

I put a coin on the counter for the ale, then another for the information. Cyril nodded, and the coins disappeared into his apron pocket.

"He left about sunset, heading toward the harbor," he said. "He still had the sash with him."

"How did he seem when he left?"

"He was sad, I think," said Cyril. "He was speaking of how he missed England. Drink will bring back memories sometimes."

"Unfortunately, the next drink he had erased them," said Plossus. "Thank you, Cyril. I'll come back tonight and entertain."

"You are both welcome here," said Cyril. "Three songs for a drink, shall we say?"

"Done," said Plossus.

We finished our ales and walked into the street.

"You're Henry," I said. "You're homesick, and you've been drinking. What do you do next?"

"I drink some more," said Plossus.

"What's the next tavern south of here?"

"Poseidon's Trident. You know it?"

"A run-down hellhole, populated by run-down sailors?"

"A generous description, but yes," said Plossus. "Tapster's a Syrian named Marcus. He keeps a cudgel the size of a small mast handy. And the barmaid's a Mohammedan."

"Is she?" I said as we walked.

"Veil and all," said Plossus.

There was a dull roar in the direction of the tavern that grew as we neared the entrance. We glanced at each other, unslung our lutes from our backs, and started singing as we came through the door.

There was a small melee in progress, a pile of old salts pummeling each other indiscriminately. The tapster had his cudgel at the ready, but was wisely letting the fracas play itself out. The barmaid was standing against the wall near us. A bottle suddenly came flying out of the pile in her direction. I lunged and snatched it out of the air before it hit her.

"Thank you, good sir," she said in a low, slightly accented voice.

"At your service, milady," I said, and I thought I detected a smile behind the veil.

We started singing more loudly, and the music distracted the outer layer of combatants, who peeled themselves away and began to sing along with us. Soon, all but the inner core of two had joined in, and Marcus discreetly nudged them with the business end of the cudgel. They got the point and ceased.

Well, a tavernfull of drunken sailors were now our dearest friends. It was not difficult to steer the topic of conversation to Henry, but the variety of accounts we received could have been about him last night, him on some other night, some other soldier some other night, or about someone else entirely in a different country.

Marcus, on the other hand, was a sober man, as a tapster must need be to be successful, and he remembered him a little better.

"He was morose, singing in that bizarre tongue of his," he said.

"He was here until Anna and I closed the place."

"Which way did he go after that?" I asked.

"Out into the night, for all I could tell," replied Marcus. "I went upstairs to my room and Anna went to hers in back. That's the last we saw of him."

"Did you perchance notice if he still wore his sash?" I asked. "He is missing it now. We are doing him a favor and looking around for it."

"I believe he had it on," said Marcus.

"I am certain that he still wore it when he went out the door," added Anna.

"Then our quest must continue," I said. "I thank you for your help."

Once again, we looked out in the street.

"Let's walk in the direction of where you found him," I suggested.

"We'll stop at the first tavern we see."

The neighborhood here was seedier, and we stayed on our guard as we walked through it. The streets were narrow and the refuse was piled higher than a man in many locations. Finally, we saw a simple sign with a mug of ale scratched into it.

"Do you know this place?" I asked Plossus.

"No, and I am not sure I want to," he said. "Must we drink what they serve?"

"If we want to get any information," I replied. "Besides, it would only be polite."

We took a deep breath and went in.

It was a small place, maybe twelve paces square, with no tables, just a pair of benches. The benches were occupied by men who looked like they had been drinking since the last century ended, and were determined to drink into the next one. The tapster—no, I cannot call him that, it would dishonor one of my favorite professions. There was a walking mass of filth who stood by an open barrel with a ladle. On a shelf behind him were a set of mugs that shared space with several spiders who looked disturbingly well fed.

"All right, we don't have to be that polite," I muttered.

Plossus sighed with relief.

"Good day, good sir," he said brightly. "We are searching for a friend of ours . . ."

"Haven't seen him," said the ladler.

"A large man wearing brown, who would have passed through late last night," continued Plossus.

"Haven't seen him," repeated the ladler.

"Wearing a sash of the Varangian Guard," finished Plossus.

The ladler stepped forward so that his face became more visible.

"Haven't seen him," he said. "Haven't seen anyone."

His eyes were clouded over and milky white.

"Forgive me," said Plossus. "Did you hear a large, drunken soldier come in, either speaking Greek with an English accent or possibly English with no accent?"

"No one came in last night except my regulars," said the man. "Are you drinking or not?"

"This is for your trouble," said Plossus, handing him a coin. The ladler took it and stepped back into the shadows.

We left.

"It was a long shot," said Plossus. "We have no real idea of his route after the Poseidon."

"Let's look a little more," I said.

We kept walking until we were back among the pleasanter smells of bread and sausages, seeing no other taverns along the way.

"Time to go to the Bull and Lion," I said. "Maybe my wife had better luck."

Aglaia was already at the tavern, a favorite of ours situated near

Boukoleon Harbor. She had secured a table and was fending off a would-be suitor. We sat on either side of her and ordered a large bowl of fish stew and a loaf of brown bread.

"You made it through four brothels quicker than we have through three taverns," I noted.

"Much less to distract me," she said. "I've had a great deal of girl talk and a few job offers."

"As a jester, of course," said Plossus.

"Of course," she said, her eyes wide and innocent. "What else could they be?"

"And did our valiant captain unsuccessfully defend his honor at any of these establishments?" I asked.

"Not in the last three days," she said. "And he is a known customer at two of them. The ladies are quite fond of him. They say that he is both a gentleman and a gentle man, a combination that they rarely see amongst the Varangians. How did you fare?"

"We lost his trail after the second tavern," I said. "He could have had his sash taken anywhere after that. There's too much ground to cover."

"There's a possibility you haven't considered," she said hesitantly.

"What is it?"

"We could go to Father Esaias."

"I thought about that," I said. "I don't want us to become beholden overmuch to him. To go to the biggest crimelord in the city over a matter this trivial—"

"It isn't trivial," she said. "Henry is our friend."

"And it would make Henry beholden to Esaias as well," I replied.

"Do you want that for our friend?"

"No," she said. "Of course not. I'm just disappointed in our results."

"There is a needle-in-a-haystack aspect to this," remarked Plossus. "Oh well, at least there's one good thing."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Rico has to pay for our meal," he said.

"I bet that's him now," said Aglaia, as the sounds of laughter approached from outside.

It was Rico, but he wasn't alone. He rode Henry's shoulders, and ducked as the captain came through the doorway.

"You can keep your stilts, boy," he called to Plossus. "And you two your horses. I hereby proclaim that Varangian is the finest ride in the city, and from henceforth I shall ride nothing else."

"Pull up a bench," I said, and Henry straddled one across from us. The dwarf slid down his back and hopped onto the bench next to him.

"What news in the palace?" asked Plossus.

"Nothing that can help us here," said Rico. "I pumped an Imperial Guard that I'm friendly with, but he had no gossip about Henry. However, Henry himself has some information about Henry."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Bits and pieces of my memory are coming back to me," he said. "Yon Plossus's nose was right. There was a woman."

"Do you remember her face? Or her name?"

"Neither," he said. "I remember—"

He stopped and glanced at Aglaia.

"I don't wish to embarrass your wife," he said.

"How gallant," said Aglaia. "But I have been gallivanting through whorehouses all morning on your behalf, and have heard tales that could make a Varangian captain blush. Proceed with your narrative, Henry."

"We'll be wanting to hear those stories later," said Rico, as Plossus nodded eagerly.

"Well, there's nothing too complicated about it," said Henry. "This woman took me to bed. I remember her body, and the pleasure it gave me. And she sang to me, a soothing, melodious voice. God, such bliss! I would spend an eternity with her if she would sing to me like that every night. And the next thing I remember is waking in that alley."

"Sashless," I said. "Well, all we need to do is check every woman with a nice body and a soothing voice."

"I volunteer!" cried Plossus.

"It seems hopeless," said Henry.

"It does at that," I agreed. "But we have until dawn to find your musical thief."

The barmaid came up to us for payment.

"Rico lost the wager, so he pays," said Plossus.

"I'm buying," said Henry, reaching for his purse. "You have been the best of friends to me. It's the least I can do."

"Well, since you insist," I began, then I stopped. "Henry, you still have your purse."

"Lucky for us," said Rico.

"Yes, I do," he said as he spilled some coins into the barmaid's hand. "Why?"

I looked at the others. Aglaia was smiling.

"This was no thief," I said. "To take a sash and leave your purse unemptied? That's madness, not larceny."

"But the sash is gone," he said.

"This woman," said Aglaia. "When she sang to you, what did she sing?"

"A lullaby," he said. "One I heard often as a child."

"She sang in English?" asked Aglaia.

"Yes, she—" began Henry, then his eyes narrowed. "She sang in English. How could that be?"

"A woman whose face you didn't see took you to bed and sang to you in English," I said. "I suddenly have a suspect. Let's go, everyone."

We walked back to the Forum of Bovis, then toward the waterfront. We passed the Two Heads of John, Plossus looking longingly in its direction, and proceeded to Poseidon's Trident.

"I saw a woman here whose face was covered and who spoke Greek with an accent," I said. "The accent may have been English."

"The barmaid?" asked Plossus. "But she's a Mohammedan, not an Englishwoman."

"She wears the garb," I said. "That doesn't mean she's of the faith. Let's bring Henry to her and see how she reacts."

The tavern was crowded, but we managed to shove enough drunken sailors off a pair of benches to make room for us. Anna was across the room, and Henry stared at her intently. Suddenly, he began to sing. It was an English lullaby. She stopped in her tracks and turned toward us, only her eyes visible. But they were locked on Henry's face.

When he was done, the more conscious denizens applauded. Anna came up to him.

"You came back for it already," she said flatly. "I thought you would. I'll fetch it for you."

She turned, but Henry shot out his arm and grabbed her by the wrist.

"Why did you take it?" he asked softly.

She turned on him.

"Take it?" she cried. "After all that, you accuse me of stealing?"

"I have scant memory of last night," he said. "Although it is beginning to return to me. I have wronged you, I see that now. But how did you come by my sash?"

"You gave it to me before you left," she said bitterly. "As a token of your high regard. I see now what the high regard of a Varangian captain is worth."

He winced, but did not let go of her.

"If I gave it to you freely, then the regard was high indeed," he said. "For drunk or sober, I would sooner part with my ax and my armor than that sash. And hearing your voice, I know that you are English, like me."

"I am," she said.

"Why do you wear this garb?" he asked.

She glanced around.

"Come with me, if you must know," she said.

We followed her into the back room, which doubled as a storage room for the tavern and her sleeping quarters. Henry looked around and nodded.

"It was here," he said. "We made love here."

"It was all your talk of missing England," she said. "I miss it as well. I followed my husband on pilgrimage ten years ago, but he died in the Holy Land, and I was only able to make it as far as Constantinople before my funds ran out."

"But why do you dress like that?" he asked.

She hesitated, then lifted her hands to her face and removed the veil. Plossus was the only one to exclaim, but none of us could look upon the scars without wincing in pity.

None of us but Henry, who stepped closer.

"Who did this to you?" he asked.

"A ruffian who sought his way with me," she said. "I fought him off, but not before he did this. I will understand if you want your token back. I will understand if you never want to look upon this monstrosity again."

He raised his hand to her face and touched the scars gently with his fingers.

"I have been a soldier practically my entire life," he said. "I am a great respecter of scars. I have a few myself."

"I remember them," she said.

"There is a quandary," he said. "I must have my sash, but I gave it to you. The solution, it appears, is for you and I to both have the sash, and I can think of only one way to do that properly. I must become yours, so that all that I am and have will be yours as well."

"You're mad!" she said in wonder.

"Never been more sane or sober than I am right now," he said.

"These fools will vouch for that."

"We will," we chorused.

"We passed a church up the street from here," said Henry. "Come, Anna. I only have a few hours left of my leave. Let us make the most of them."

"But I must tend to my duties," she protested.

"I'll serve in your place," said Plossus. "I am well versed in the ways of taverns. Make the most of your time, good Anna."

She began to reattach her veil. Henry stopped her.

"You shall not hide yourself anymore," he said. "You are about to become the wife of a Varangian captain. Walk beside me with pride."

"When we exchange our vows, I will remove it," she said. "Because then I will believe it."

"You will be our witnesses?" asked Henry.

"With all our hearts," said Aglaia.

Plossus took an apron from a hook on the wall and vanished into the tavern. The rest of us left by the back way. The church was near, the priest was willing, the veil was dropped, and the bride was kissed. That night, we serenaded them as they took a room at an inn. Then we left them.

We would see them often during our time in the city. That time was unfortunately short, as I have related elsewhere. I know that they survived the first siege of the Fourth Crusade, but after Aglaia and I were expelled from Constantinople, we never heard of them again.

I have, during my long career as a jester, been the arranger of many marriages, overtly, surreptitiously, and even accidentally. Apart from my own, none gave me more pleasure in the telling than that of Henry, Anna, and the sash that bound them together. ♣

PERPETUAL CARE, *continued from page 71*

"Or, how's this, Mr. Artist Prick to the Stars. The fault lay not all with our moms, but also with our dads."

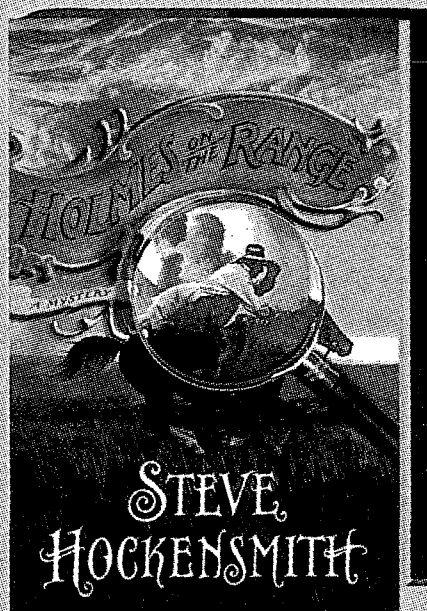
"Loser. Momma's boy," he yelled.

Cheery. Calling out childish epithets, just like old times. I went in and locked the door behind me.

I was stunned, really, at my own words. I hadn't thought about it much before. Mom is such an ever-present anchor around my neck. I blame her on a daily basis. But our dads were real wusses too. Jerks. But Nat and me, we two sounded like the biggest wusses of all. I knew.

It gave me a lot to think about that night, safe as I was within the four tan walls of my room. And now that Mom's back home, I'm still thinking. What worries me, aside from an understandable uneasiness at knowing I live next door to the most perfect little eternal family ever in the history of mankind, is that I might not get all this stuff figured out, much less do anything about it, until the last crumb of Nat Whitty's indestructible granite mausoleum has turned to dust. ♣

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Be it Los Angeles or Marseilles or Sicily, unsavory places and people—and choices—are universally part and parcel of the human condition.

Andrea Camilleri's sixth mystery to feature Sicilian Detective Inspector Salvo Montalbano is *THE SMELL OF THE NIGHT* (Penguin, \$12). The middle-aged policeman with a voracious appetite (his father called him *liccu cannarutu*, which means both glutton and gourmand), is at once curious and passionate. The curiosity, of course, is useful as a professional characteristic, but the passion tends to lead to trouble in both his professional and personal life. He has a sly sense of humor that bedevils superiors and colleagues alike, but he is also a compassionate man. Finally, he is a literate man whose allusions range from Greek myth to Italian poets to William Faulkner.

In the small town of Vigàta, a *ragioniere* (loosely translated, a financier) has disappeared, as has the fortune he obtained in an elaborate pyramid scheme defrauding retirees. It is unclear what has happened to Emanuele Gargano, but opinions are divided between those who think he escaped to some island paradise and those who think he ran afoul of the Mafia and will never defraud anyone again.

The case really isn't Montalbano's, but circumstances conspire to engage his interest—"an insubstantial impression, a pale shadow, a tenuous thread"—and that is enough to start him sniffing around, which he does with determination and cleverness.

Whether he is wreaking vengeance on a builder rash enough to despoil a beautiful Saraçen olive tree or defusing a tense hostage situation, Montalbano has a captivating flair. Camilleri has given him a crime worth solving and a suitably ingenious solution to match. *The Smell of the Night* is an unlikely title for a mystery, but Inspector Salvo Montalbano, while decidedly unorthodox, is a likely candidate for the pantheon of eccentric and appealing detectives.

TOTAL CHAOS (Europa Editions, \$14.95), the first novel in the



late Jean-Claude Izzo's *Marseilles Trilogy*, traces the connected lives and fates of three childhood friends whose paths through Marseilles's teeming, seething, volatile mix of races and cultures take very different directions. In good times the port city is a jewel. Political and religious divisions and a weakening of the old crime gangs combine with a weak economy to make Marseilles a violent and desperate place, where "the more unemployment there was, the more people became aware of the immigrants."

Friends Ugo, Manu, and Fabio grew up dreaming of Homer's "wine-dark sea" and committing small robberies, until a botched job changed their lives. Eventually, Manu left town, Ugo became a full-time crook, and Fabio Montale became a police detective.

When Manu is gunned down, Ugo returns to avenge him. Ugo is then killed, and Fabio sets out to discover who and why. Other crimes and cases converge, but for Fabio it boils to something more elemental: "I needed to believe in myself as a cop again. I needed boundaries, rules, codes. Something to hold on to. Every step I was about to take would move me farther away from the law."

Izzo's prose is infused with music, poetry, politics, and philosophy. Yet despite the exotic setting, the story is familiar as Fabio cuts through the corruption and rot to strike a blow, whether it be futile or not. A dark and vibrant novel that seethes with passion, this first volume of the *Marseilles Trilogy* was followed by *Chuormo* and *Solea*, which Europa will publish in 2006.

James Sallis, best known for his Lew Griffin novels with their steamy New Orleans settings, delivers a brilliant short novel, *DRIVE* (Poisoned Pen Press, \$19.95), set this time mostly in Los Angeles.

Known only as "Driver," the hero of this book is a loner, self-contained and always ready to move. Sallis gives scant clues as to Driver's pedigree: a violently shattered childhood, followed by foster care and an abrupt break into adulthood. He doesn't read much, but on his nightstand are books by Richard Stark, George Pelecanos, John Shannon, and Gary Phillips.

Driver finds two ways to turn his skill in handling cars into income. He becomes a sought-after stunt driver and a top-notch driver of getaway cars. Driver's minimalist approach to life works until he's set up in a double cross when a heist goes bad and his life is threatened. Driver knows that he has to get to the man at the top before he gets to him.

Sallis is a gifted writer and he doesn't cram his story into this slim volume. Rather he distills it into a superbly potent brew that burns going down and explodes in the belly.

RED SHIFT

D. H. REDDALL

Robert Tanager was not in a good mood. He struck me as the kind of guy who was never in a good mood.

"It's pronounced *tuh-nozh*, like collage. Not like the bird." He was a slightly built man, mid- to late-seventies. A beret covered a long tangle of snow white hair that framed a firm chin and piercing blue eyes. He probably wasn't a man to fool with when he was younger. Not now, either.

"You want a drink?"

It was ten thirty. A.M.

"No, thanks."

I looked around while he filled a tumbler with Jack Daniel's. The studio had once been a two-car garage. Now it was crowded with canvases, easels, and palettes. I noticed several buckets of paint suspended by ropes before a large canvas.

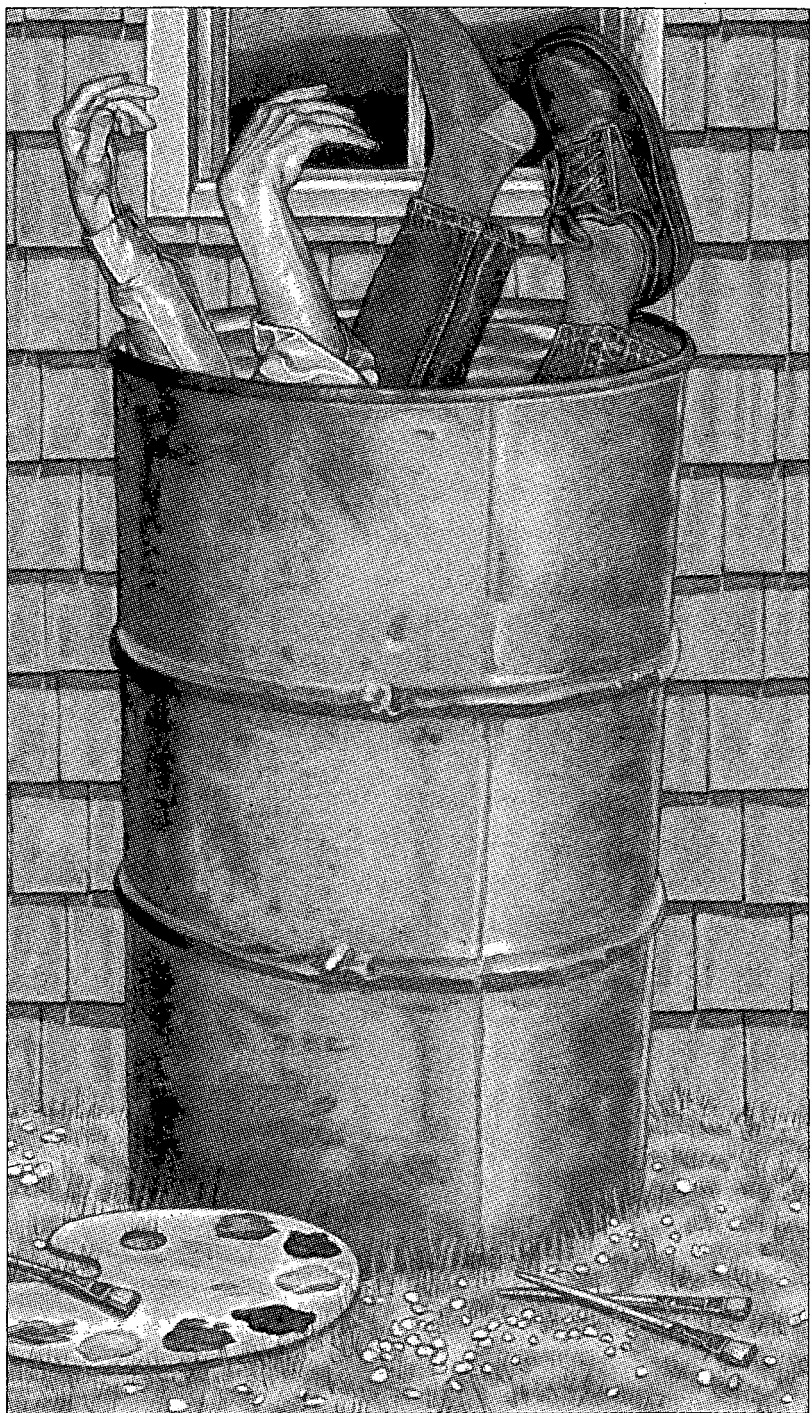
Tanager took a measured sip of whiskey. He did it like a man who'd had lots of practice. Then he handed me safety glasses and padded earphones.

"Put these on." He donned his own and gathered up a pump shotgun. Motioning me well back, he stepped up to a line chalked on the floor and proceeded to shoot each of the buckets in rapid succession. The blasts propelled gouts of different colored paint haphazardly across the canvas. Jackson Pollock the easy way, with holes. He pulled off the earphones and threw them on a chair.

"That's a four-by-eight canvas. When it dries I'll cut it up into eight pieces, each two feet square, frame them, give them suitably opaque titles, and sell them for . . . well, whatever the market will bear."

I didn't know what to say.

"It pays the bills. I've got a lot of overhead. Four ex-wives for starters. This allows me to pursue my serious work." He slugged down some more whiskey and surveyed the chaotic canvas. "You know what Al Capp said about abstract art? He called it a product of the untalented sold by the unprincipled to the utterly bewildered. He was partly right, anyway."



I considered asking which part he was right about, but instead said, "You believe you need protection?"

"There have been threats."

I eyed the shotgun. "From who, the neighbors?"

"I don't know who, obviously! If I knew I'd go to the cops, wouldn't I. Some of my work is what you might call provocative. I'm trying to wake people up. We don't live in a Norman Rockwell world anymore. Not that we ever did."

"A lot of people probably wish we did."

"Yeah. Maybe it's one of them that's been calling me in the middle of the night threatening to smear my brains all over a canvas."

"He ever say anything else?"

"What the hell, isn't that enough? Now look, I've got an opening tomorrow afternoon. Four o'clock at the Stone Horse Gallery. Can you cover me?"

"Yes, and I can probably stop anyone from getting to you, but if someone is really determined to harm you, you'll need a team, around the clock. I can't provide that."

"I don't want that. Too expensive, too intrusive. You probably wouldn't believe it, but I have a fairly active love life."

I did believe it. He was still a good-looking man and spirited, to say the least. I said I'd be at the gallery, we completed the necessary paperwork, and I left him to watch the paint dry.

The Stone Horse Gallery was a large space just off Main Street in Hyannis. I got there an hour early on Friday. Jim Butash, the owner, listened intently as I explained the situation.

"It would seem," I said, "that someone is taking art a little too seriously."

Butash looked up at me through glasses so thick they made his eyes appear double their normal size.

"You don't think art is serious?" he said. "You're wrong. Art, in any of its forms, is deadly serious. People respond to art. Never mind the Inquisition, the Communists, the Nazis, all of whom proscribed art that they deemed heretical. Just look at what happened to Salman Rushdie. Look at the tempest surrounding Serrano or Mapplethorpe, or the exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum a couple of years ago. Why, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* sparked a riot in Paris when it opened in 1913." He removed the goggles and wiped them with a tissue. "Are you familiar with the Astor Place Riot in New York?"

I said I wasn't.

"It occurred in the spring of 1849. The Astor Place Opera House, which was located, I believe, where Broadway meets the

Bowery, was featuring *Macbeth* with an English actor, William Macready. Macready was very unpopular here and people threw eggs, apples, potatoes, pennies, and if I'm not mistaken, a container of asafetida. Not to mention some chairs."

"Sounds like Yankee Stadium when the Red Sox are in town."

"Oh, much worse. You see, New Yorkers preferred the American actor, Edwin Forrest, and a few nights later when there was a repeat performance of the play, again starring Macready, there was trouble. The mayor placed two hundred police officers outside the theater. There were thousands of people in the streets protesting Macready's appearance and some of them began throwing bricks and stones at the officers, who retreated inside. More stones came through the windows and hit the theatergoers. The upshot of it was that the military was called in to restore order, the crowd attacked them as well, and when it was all over there were twenty people shot dead, more than a hundred wounded. Art matters, Mr. Stubblefield."

"Point taken."

His phone rang and I moved away to begin inspecting the premises. The office and the storage rooms were clear and had no doors leading outside. The basement checked out as well: no infernal machines ticking away, no crazed art critics lurking behind the boiler.

Back upstairs, I took a turn through the gallery's four exhibition rooms. The two largest featured Tanager's work. I could see why he was considered controversial. There was a life-sized papier-mâché model of the president disappearing down a toilet, merrily waving a ten-gallon hat. Next to it a topographical representation of Iraq covered a table. Over it flew an American flag with skulls replacing the stars. A large oil depicted the previous president in a compromising position with a woman, posed before Brueghel's painting, "Blind Leading the Blind." There was more, but I got the idea. Besides, I've always rather liked the Impressionists.

By four the gallery was buzzing. It was a mixed crowd. A guy in torn jeans and a T-shirt reading "Eat the Rich" was chatting up a woman three times his age wearing furs. Canapés were being eaten, wine drunk, artwork ogled, eyebrows raised. Tanager was holding forth at the back of the room by a table holding brochures of the show.

The kid came in carrying a gym bag. His hair was green, but that was unremarkable in this setting. He kept his eye on Tanager, though, as he edged around the wall and slid into an adjoining room. I started after him, but out of the corner of my eye I caught a blur of activity. A girl was running full tilt toward Tanager. She

was holding a cream pie. I changed course and charged her, yelling at Tanager to duck. He did, which was fortunate because while I was still a couple of feet away she let fly. The pie missed Tanager by only a foot or so and hit the wall behind him with a splat.

I grabbed the girl by the arm and led her to the office. Butash was restoring order and pouring more wine. Nobody seemed too upset by the incident. Maybe they thought the girl was a performance artist.

"What was that all about?" I asked her.

She swiped a strand of hair from her face and burst out laughing.

"I missed him."

"Why did you do it?"

She shrugged. I figured her to be about fourteen, but the older I get, the harder it is to judge. She seemed completely unrepentant.

"If someone offered you a hundred bucks to throw a pie at somebody, wouldn't you do it?" She shook her head. "I can't believe I missed him. I told the guy that Kevin should throw it, but he said Kevin had to be the decoy."

"What guy?"

"I don't know. He, like, came up to me and Kevin. He was dressed up like a clown. You know, red nose and all. Said did we want to make a fast hundred bucks. We figured, like, you know, he was a sex pervert, but he said all I had to do was throw a pie at this guy—he pointed him out through the window—and, you know, hit him in the face with it, like in the cartoons. He said it was a publicity stunt and that the gallery owner knew about it and we wouldn't get in any trouble. He had the pie in his van, said, 'Do it now, no waiting.'"

"What kind of van?"

"I don't know. A white van. Am I, like, going to get in trouble for this? I mean, it was just a pie, and I didn't even hit him."

Butash appeared. He looked worried. "You'd better take a look at this."

I followed him back to the main room. Everything was back to normal, people schmoozing as if nothing had happened.

"Look," said Butash, pointing to the wall. The pie was still there.

"It's stuck fast," he said. "We can't get it off."

"The pie was *what*?"

"It wasn't a pie," I said. "It was a pie tin filled with quick-drying epoxy glue and rubber cement covered with a little whipped cream."

Tanager was nonplussed. "So that's why they couldn't get it off the wall. Some wiseass came up and asked me what it was called."

"This wasn't a prank. If it had hit you squarely in the face it would have sealed your eyes shut, at the very least. There's a good chance it would have blocked your oral and nasal passages as well."

"I could have suffocated, in other words."

"Yes, you could have."

"That's attempted murder. Where's the girl?"

"The police are questioning her."

Tanager swallowed some wine, grimaced, and called Butash over. "You got anything besides this swill?" Butash scurried off. "This guy's not fooling around," Tanager said.

"No, he isn't."

"I've been invited to participate in a seminar at the college next week: 'Art and the Evolving Paradigm' or some such crap. Bunch of brain-eaten academic types, but they're willing to pay the freight. Will you stay on this thing, see if you can find this son of a bitch?"

I said I would.

"And stand guard at this seminar? That was a little too close today."

"I agree."

"Move a little quicker next time. Please."

"We need to talk. Soon. When you're not busy."

"About what?"

"I need to know who might want to kill you, and why. I'll need to ask some personal questions and you'll need to answer them."

He didn't like it, but he nodded. "Call me tomorrow morning."

Elaine Coffas owned the Nexus Gallery in Cummaquid. She was framing some canvases the following morning when I asked my questions.

"Robert was already established on Cape Cod when I moved here. That was over thirty years ago. I've never carried his work. Not my style. I have done some framing for him. He can be very difficult."

"What's his reputation as an artist?"

She paused to run the miter saw across a length of molding.

"Well, for a number of years now he has engaged in rather confrontational work, silly installations, gratuitous stuff involving toilets, religious symbols, body parts, flags. There's a limited market for that kind of thing out here. Your average tourist wants to go home with a nice watercolor of the dunes, not a tricolored urinal or a headless Barbie doll. So he turns out abstract pieces, constructions, seascapes, anything that will sell. It's a shame, really. He

possesses considerable talent for serious work when he chooses to use it, which is rarely. To answer your question, nobody in the art community here thinks well of him."

"You heard about the incident at the Stone Horse Gallery?"

"Yes. Frankly, it wouldn't surprise me if Robert staged the whole thing just to draw attention to himself. I can't imagine that anyone would actually want to harm him."

"Jim Butash isn't quite as sanguine about that."

She laughed. "Poor Jim. Did he give you the Astor Place Riot lecture? 'Art matters' and all that?"

"As a matter of fact, he did."

Coffas shook her head. "That riot was more about class warfare than artistic differences. The Englishman was simply viewed as a snob by the Bowery Boys. Look, you really should talk to Raffi Maldano. He probably knows Robert better than anyone." She jotted down an address and phone number.

"By the way," I said, "do you know what *asafoetida* is?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

I phoned Tanager next and he said to come right over. That suited me. I figured that by afternoon he might be even more obstreperous than he was in the morning. I found him in his studio, glass in hand. He started right in.

"Can you believe it? Picasso's *Boy with a Pipe* just sold at auction for a hundred and four million dollars. A hundred and four million! No painting is worth that. Who the hell is buying these things?"

"Investment bankers. Japanese businessmen. Martha Stewart. I don't know."

"What a joke. The art world is just a joke. Some kid spraying graffiti on subway cars gets 'discovered' and all of a sudden his scrawls are worth five figures. Then some clown down at the Hirschorn gets funding for an exhibition consisting of light bulbs going on and off in an empty room. Well hell, that's profound. Another hundred grand thrown away on the 'evolving paradigm.'"

I wondered if the evolving paradigm, whatever it was, included shotgun art and sheep corpses, but I kept it to myself.

"Do you have any enemies, Mr. Tanager?"

He snorted. "They say the only sailor who hasn't run aground is the one who's never left the dock. I'm a well-traveled sailor."

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"Christ, boy, I'm seventy-seven years old, got four ex-wives and several kids, all of whom reportedly have my face tattooed on the bottoms of their feet so they can stomp on me all day long. I got critics who consider me a hack, religious nuts who think I'm

Beelzebub, patriots who want to kill me, then dig me up and kill me again. Take your pick."

"Someone might accuse you of paranoia."

"Yeah, well what's paranoia but caution pejoratively defined. Someone tried to kill me yesterday. I don't know who or why. That's what I'm paying you to find out."

Tanager had no idea where his former wives were. He believed they had all reverted to their maiden names, so great was their animus toward him. I figured if one of them wanted to kill him she'd have done it by now.

Raffi Maldano didn't answer his phone, so I spent the rest of the day talking to artists and gallery owners, all to no avail. I interviewed Butash again. He could shed no further light on the matter, but he did tell me that he'd met Tanager's current flame, one Irene Sibley.

"Robert likes them young," he confided with a knowing look. "Of course, that's relative: she's probably in her late fifties. A very handsome woman, I must say."

Before leaving I walked through the gallery. Several of Tanager's paintings had sold. The toilet had not. The pie was still hanging on the wall. It hadn't sold either.

I got the office window open the following morning, made coffee, and watched a pair of sparrows building a nest under the eaves of the building next door. September can be the best month of the year on Cape Cod. The weather is perfect and most of the tourists have gone. The Chamber of Commerce now refers to spring and fall as the "shoulder seasons," and they spare no effort to encourage tourism at those times. Their philosophy, apparently, is that business is sacred and the rest of us just have to endure more weeks of traffic jams and crowded beaches. I suspect the Chamber would whoop up the return of public executions if that would bring a few more bucks to town.

The phone rang. It was Butash.

"Terrible news, Mr. Stubblefield. Robert Tanager was found dead less than an hour ago."

"What happened?"

"I needed to talk to him about moving some of his pieces. He didn't answer his phone this morning, so I sent one of my employees up there first thing. She found him. I called the police, and I thought you should know."

Lieutenant Eddie Olivera was on the scene when I arrived. The ambulance was just leaving. No lights, no siren, no hurry now.

Olivera was conferring with another cop I knew. When he spotted me he nudged Olivera.

"Nothing to worry about, Lieutenant. Here comes Sam Spade. He'll have it all wrapped up in a couple of minutes."

"Officer Jordan. I thought you'd be at the family picnic, looking for a date."

He started toward me. "You buckle your mouth, pal, before I slam it shut for you."

Olivera stepped between us. "Start interviewing the neighbors, Ray."

Jordan glared at me over Olivera's shoulder, but he did as he was told.

Olivera appeared amused. "Now why do you always have to antagonize that man?"

"He's living proof that there are more horses' asses than there are horses. What have we got here?"

"How does this concern you?"

"I was working for him. He'd been receiving threats. And someone tried to zip him with an epoxy pie two days ago."

"I know about that. A little baroque, don't you think?"

"Baroque? You've been peeking in your thesaurus again, haven't you?"

"Come with me." He led me around behind Tanager's studio. A fifty-five-gallon oil drum stood near the rear wall.

"Butash's girl found him in there. Looks like he was leaning against it or sitting on the edge and fell in."

"Cause of death?"

"Won't be sure until an autopsy, but it looks like asphyxiation. He was wedged in tight, arms and legs sticking up. Once you're in, it's just about impossible to get out. The M.E. says you eventually die from constricture and muscle exhaustion. Slow suffocation, in other words. Not a pleasant way to go."

"Okay to touch?"

"If you're careful. You know the drill."

With the tip of my ballpoint I tilted the drum to one side. The grass beneath looked exactly like the rest of the lawn, just slightly matted down. The barrel was badly rusted.

"Anything about this bother you?" I said.

"Like what?" Olivera was enjoying himself.

"Barrel's rusted. Grass underneath is green, barely damaged."

"You read too many crime novels, maybe. Rembrandt here reeked of alcohol. He got hammered, wandered out to take a leak or something, fell in."

"Sure. And right before that he drove down to the dump and

picked up an oil drum. Going to make a planter out of it, no doubt. Come on, Eddie, we both know the mob has used this technique before."

"All right, I don't like it either. The lab boys are going to go over everything, but for now it's an accidental death. Unless you got something to tell me."

"Nothing yet. You talk to the girlfriend?"

"Sibley? Yeah. She says Tanager was working late in his studio last night. That's not unusual, according to her. He'd also been at the sauce. *That's* not unusual either, I understand. Sibley went to bed a little after midnight. Butash's girl woke her up this morning with the bad news."

"Any prints on the pie tin?"

"Yep. Couple of partials from Butash where he tried to pry it off the wall. Three good ones and a palmar from the thrower, and a couple from a party unknown. We'll run them through NCIC. Keep in touch, Charles."

"Everyone is aware that Robert drank to excess, but this . . . Well, this is shocking."

The walls of Raffi Maldano's spacious study were covered with paintings, all of them representational, most of them renderings of inlets, bays, marshland, dunes. A few boats here and there, no people.

"How long have you known Tanager?"

"Oh, since I moved out here. That would be a little over four years now." He limped to an easy chair, slowly lowered himself into it, and laid aside his cane. Maldano was enormously fat, not just in the gut like some men get, but everywhere, even his fingers. The voluminous Hawaiian shirt did nothing to mitigate his appearance.

"You were friends, then? I ask because Tanager's friends seem to be in short supply."

"Yes, friends. I've never cared for most of his work. I like trees that look like trees, and I abhor propagandism in art, but I liked Robert and I admired his spirit."

"You sound like an art critic."

"Oh my, no. I wouldn't presume. You know how Channing Pollock described critics: legless men who teach running. No, I'm merely an opinionated collector."

"Know anyone who harbored a grudge against Tanager?"

Maldano shook his head. "As you say, Robert was not well received in our little art community. And then some of his shows brewed a tempest in a teapot: nasty letters, a small protest outside

of one gallery, a few intemperate phone calls." He squinted up at me. "Why? You said this was an accident."

"I said it was *probably* an accident, but he'd been receiving threats lately and I have to consider the possibility that someone may have helped him along."

"Oh my." Maldano seemed genuinely distressed. "We have so little violent crime here, and an *artist* . . ."

I got up to go. A watercolor over the mantelpiece caught my eye. "That's a nice painting. Pochet Neck isn't it, looking east toward Nauset Beach."

Maldano smiled. "You know your Cape, Mr. Stubblefield."

"The artist left out the houses."

"Yes. It looks so much nicer that way, don't you agree? You'll excuse me, sir, if I don't see you out."

They put Tanager in the ground on Tuesday in a remote cemetery in West Barnstable. It was straight off the lot of Universal Studios: wrought-iron fences, lichen-stained headstones, dark trees brooding beneath a swollen sky that threatened rain.

Some of the gravestones dated back two hundred years or more. Many were engraved with bound sheaves of wheat or winged skulls, reminders, if any were needed, that we were in the province of the dead. I've read that tombstones are shaped like doors because they are meant to represent just that—doorways to the next world. The winged skull was pure optimism: death, yes, but with the hope of ascension.

The usual cheerful little ditties were there as well, like that inscribed on the marker for one Ezra Small:

This mortal life decays apace
How soon the bubble's broke.
Adam and all his numerous race
Are vanity and smoke.

Thus uplifted, I joined Butash to observe the ceremony. There were all of six people present. Besides Butash and myself, Maldano appeared, pushed in a wheelchair by an attendant. A woman in black and a clergyman completed the assembly. Butash was appalled.

"Six. This is very sad."

I nodded toward the woman. "Is that Irene Sibley?"

"It is. A sorry day for her."

The ceremony was brief. I didn't listen. I have no patience for piety or for platitudes, and no particular confidence in the exis-

tence of an afterlife. I was attending mainly with the hope of meeting Irene Sibley. Butash said he would introduce us after the burial. We were returning to our cars when he did so.

"My condolences, Ms. Sibley."

She nodded, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. She was a tall, solidly built woman, with green eyes, a full, sensuous mouth, and prominent cheekbones. She made no attempt to disguise the gray hair that was gradually replacing the brown. She was, as Butash said, a striking woman.

"I wonder if I might intrude briefly upon you in the next few days."

"For what purpose?" She had a low, smoky voice.

"I was working for Mr. Tanager. There are a few loose ends, a couple of questions you might be able to help me with."

"Yes, of course. Thursday would be best. I will be leaving after that. I couldn't bear to stay after this." She turned away, and Butash led her to her car just as the first raindrops struck the leaves.

She was seated on a paint-spattered stool in Tanager's studio, staring at a large oil painting. In the painting, fiery red globes seemed to be streaking across a black canvas, rapidly receding from the viewer. Some of them exhibited vaguely human features. It was a disturbing picture.

"Robert just finished this last week. He called it *Red Shift*."

She saw the look of incomprehension on my face.

"I know. I didn't get it at first, either. Robert explained to me that the more distant other galaxies are from Earth, the faster they are traveling away from us, and from each other, and therefore the more their light shifts to the red end of the spectrum. Thus, *Red Shift*."

"The faces would seem to indicate more than a reference to astronomy."

"Oh yes. You see, Robert was convinced that people are disconnected, moving apart from one another personally and culturally. He believed that people could best be made aware of this in a nonverbal way, through art. He had no use for discourse, arguing, proselytizing. He called that the futility of linearity, or something like that. I didn't fully grasp what he meant, but I understood that he was a profoundly pessimistic man."

"A misanthrope?"

"No, not really. He didn't hate people. He just, I don't know, he'd given up on them, I guess. People disappointed him." She walked over to the large shotgun canvas that Tanager never got

a chance to cut apart. "And he in turn disappointed other people with this kind of thing."

"How long did you know him?"

"I met him this past spring, in a gallery. I was vacationing, I wandered in, we got talking." She smiled. "I've heard Cape Codders say that once you get sand in your shoe you're hooked. Well, I met Robert and I was hooked. I moved in with him a week later."

"Did he have any enemies?"

She chewed her lower lip while she considered the question. "I'd say a lot of people didn't like Robert, or his work, which is the same thing, really. And he received some ugly phone calls late at night, usually when there was an opening or a group show in which he was included. But if you mean someone who might want to kill him, as the police seem to think, I would say no."

"Anything else you can remember?"

"Well, I did overhear part of a phone conversation about two weeks ago. I came in from the garden and Robert was yelling, 'You can't get blood from a turnip!' He was very upset. There was more arguing, and he finally slammed the phone down."

"Do you know who he was talking to?"

"Yes. It was Raffi Maldano. I asked Robert about it, but he refused to discuss it further."

"Ms. Sibley, would you mind if I took a look around? Maybe something in Robert's personal effects will give me something to go on."

"You think someone killed Robert."

"Not necessarily, but I want to close the book on that possibility, if I can."

"I have no objection." She led me to the house and left me to my search.

An hour later I had discovered two things that were suggestive. The first was that, according to his bank statements, Tanager had been going south, financially, for some time. He was, in fact, almost broke. The second was that he had been making regular payments to the RAM Creative Agency. A thousand a month, every month, stretching back three years, which was as far as Tanager's records went. I looked up the agency in the phone book. The number was Raffi Maldano's.

Despite the mild weather, Maldano had a fire going. A miniature schnauzer was nestled in his lap, keeping a close watch on me. I got right to the point.

"Tanager was paying you a thousand dollars a month. Mind telling me why?"

"Not to me, dear boy. To the agency. I was Robert's agent."

"He needed an agent out here?"

"Not here, but several Cape Cod artists have found markets in California. Robert was always looking for outlets for his work. I still have a lot of contacts out there, and I took him on as a client and began representing him there."

"And your commissions just happened to work out to exactly a thousand a month. For what, three years? Four?"

Maldano shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "I don't see that it's any of your concern." The avuncular demeanor was gone now, replaced by something a bit harder.

"I'll tell you what makes it my business," I said. "I think you've been blackmailing Tanager for years. I think that if the cops decide to check your records they'll find no correlation between Tanager's sales and your fees. Shall we give them a call, or would you rather talk to me?" It was mostly an empty threat, but Maldano would not welcome the scrutiny.

"He's dead, Maldano. I'm not interested in blackmail. If he was murdered, I want to know who did it."

"Oh, very well. It started back in the early fifties, in California. I was an aspiring artist then. Robert and I belonged to LALA, the Los Angeles League of Artists: the acronym apparently appealed to the founder's sense of humor. Robert Tanager was then Peter Weiss, which was his birth name. Possibly you remember that this was the time of the McCarthy hearings, HUAC and all that. Forgive me if I subject you to a brief history lesson.

"Everyone has heard of the Hollywood Ten, the blacklist, the supposedly subversive movies. What is forgotten is that the FBI had a number of artists under surveillance as well, and some of those artists suffered. Rockwell Kent is a good example. He was summoned to testify before the committee, had his passport revoked, his reputation smeared. Because of that many museums and other institutions stopped taking his work. His career was damaged, and he was not the only one.

"Peter Weiss was a radical even then. When everyone else began depoliticizing their work for fear of McCarthy, Peter just turned up the heat. And of course he was called before the committee."

"They had a tiger by the tail."

"That's what we all thought, but we were wrong. His career was taking off, you see, and he decided that rather than jeopardize it, he would name names. 'They've already been named anyway,' he told me. 'They can't be killed twice.' He gave them a dozen or so names, and it turned out that, unfortunately, a couple of them

hadn't previously been named. Careers were damaged, some irreparably."

"What happened to Tanager? Or should I say Weiss?"

"He became a pariah. By trying to protect his career he destroyed it. No gallery would touch him. Most of the artists wouldn't talk to him. He began to drink too much, his marriage dissolved, he was reduced to taking jobs at newspapers, illustrating ads for shoes and underwear, and one day he was gone."

"But you tracked him down."

"Nothing as sinister as that. When my wife died I retired to Cape Cod. In the course of collecting local art I came across a painting that was distinctive in style. I recognized it at once as a Weiss, or someone strongly influenced by him. I made inquiries, hung around the scene, and one day there he was. Older, somewhat dissipated, but instantly recognizable. He was not, as you can imagine, overjoyed when I shook his hand, looked him squarely in the eye, and said, 'Hello Peter. It's been a long time.'"

"And that's when you started to squeeze him." Maldano flinched.

"An unfortunate turn of phrase, but yes. There are still a lot of people in the art world who remember what he did. He couldn't risk being exposed. And to be fair about it, I did place quite a bit of his work in important galleries."

"Don't get all noble on me. It was in your interest to keep his stuff selling."

"True. I had to convince him to work in his earlier style, of course, in which he was both original and very talented. Very bold, edgy work that has found a modest audience today. Of course, he continued to grind out a lot of schlock, riding whatever artistic wave was popular, in order to pay all the alimony, child support, liquor bills—"

"And the RAM Agency fees."

Maldano shrugged. "That too."

"But his fortunes were declining, and you can't get blood from a turnip."

His head snapped around at that.

"Oh yes, I have a witness to that conversation."

"But I wouldn't kill him, kill the goose that lays the golden egg. That's insane!"

He was right. Unless Tanager had threatened to go to the cops, why cancel a steady paycheck? And Tanager wouldn't go to the cops and risk having his past exposed.

"What do you know about Irene Sibley?"

His eyes widened. "Surely you don't suspect Irene? Why, she's

been a good companion to Robert, supportive of him and his work."

"What do you know about her?" I repeated.

"Well, nothing really. She stays in the background, isn't involved in the business side of Robert's work, doesn't even attend his openings."

I thought it all over for a few minutes. Finally I said, "Here's where I'm at: I think Tanager was murdered. I have no idea why or by whom, but maybe it has something to do with the old days, with his betrayals. I want you to do some digging. You say he ruined a couple of men's careers, men who hadn't previously been named to the committee. Use those connections you told me about. See if those men are still alive. Maybe one of them stumbled onto Weiss's new identity, like you did. Maybe he's the kind of guy who holds a grudge. It's a long shot, but it's all I've got."

"And what's in it for me?"

"Like I said, I don't care about the blackmail, as long as it has no bearing on Tanager's death. I want his killer."

"Why so determined? He's dead, after all."

"He hired me to protect him. I didn't do a very good job of it, but that doesn't mean it's over."

Maldano called me late that same afternoon.

"I did as you asked, Mr. Stubblefield, and I have information. One of the men Robert betrayed has been in a nursing home for several years. The other died in 1959."

"How does that help?"

"Well, the second man, Philip Norcross, apparently went into a downward spiral after the committee hearings. He lost his teaching position at the university, and the large corporations that had been buying his paintings for their corporate offices stopped calling. Nobody knows exactly what happened next, but in 1959 he killed himself. He left two small children, a girl and a boy." He paused to take a breath. "The daughter's name was Irene."

"The same, you think?"

"I'm afraid so. My source knew that she married a man named Sibley, although the marriage didn't last. By all reports, she has not had a happy life. After her father died, her mother worked a series of menial jobs in order to keep them afloat. They lived in near poverty, in other words. Then her mother died after a stroke." Another pause. "My friend tells me that Irene is not a stable person. The word is that she's received psychological counseling off and on for years. Perhaps she blamed Robert for all of it, I don't know."

"How do you think she found him?"

"Perhaps the same way I did. Maybe a family friend out there spotted one of Robert's paintings and mentioned it to her and she followed the trail back here."

That seemed reasonable. A lifetime of resentment suddenly inflamed by the thought that Peter Weiss was still alive and selling his paintings, while her father was in the ground. Even if Weiss had legally changed his name, there were any number of ways to track him down. A competent detective would locate him, and given Tanager's proclivities and Sibley's good looks, seducing him would be easy. She'd obviously been aware of Maldano's game and gave me enough of a hint to be sure that I'd find out about it too, thus shifting suspicion to him. The late night threats were pure serendipity.

"I presume," said Maldano, "that this satisfies the terms of our agreement. Concerning my dealings with Robert, I mean."

I assured him that it did. Then I locked up the office and headed for my car.

It was dark by the time I turned into Tanager's street. I was pretty certain now that Sibley had killed him. She had a motive, however twisted, and she had opportunity: Maldano had told me that she never attended Tanager's openings. It would have been a simple matter to dress up as a clown and, given her size and husky voice, to pass as a man. Her size would also explain how she'd managed to stuff her drunken lover into the oil drum. Proving all of it would not be so simple.

Sibley's green Caprice was in the driveway, door open, engine running. She wasn't in it. A road map was open on the front seat. Suitcases were thrown carelessly in the back. I was leaning in to shut off the engine when I sensed movement behind me. I straightened up and started to turn, and then someone dropped an anvil on my head.

"I didn't know you played croquet, Charles."

Eddie Olivera was standing by the bed, a broad smile splitting his face.

"I don't. Where are my clothes?"

"They say you can leave after the doc examines you one more time. Nasty concussion. She hit you with a croquet mallet. Not a kid's mallet, but one of those professional jobs. You know: long handle, big square head." He smiled some more. "First time I've ever seen anyone take you down."

"You get her?"

"Not yet. Tanager's neighbor was walking her dog, saw you stretched out on the driveway. By the time we got it sorted out Sibley was undoubtedly over the bridge. That will make it a little harder. But we'll get her."

"I suspect when you do, you'll find that her prints match the third set on the pie tin. She was careless there."

"Amateur. Now, let's have the whole thing."

I gave it to him, leaving out the part about Maldano's blackmail.

"Unless you got prints off the oil drum you'll have a hard time proving she killed him."

Olivera grunted. "Barrel's rusted. We got some smudges, but . . . Sibley's buggy, isn't she?"

"I'd say so."

"Imagine being that torqued off for fifty years."

I tried, but I couldn't.

The next afternoon I drove back out to Tanager's place. The studio was open. I went in and wandered around, looking at his paintings. *Red Shift* was the most prominent, the vague faces receding into blackness, mouths gaping in silent screams. Tanager's symbols for human alienation. He'd placed his faith in the power of symbols. And what was Sibley's pie in the face, after all, but a symbol, stopping up the mouth of a man who had said things he shouldn't.

I'd sort of liked Tanager. He was feisty and demanding and he didn't feel he had to explain himself or apologize for who he was. Irene Sibley had gotten close to him, close enough to understand him and what he was trying to accomplish with his life's work. And then she'd killed him for a mistake made half a century before.

It didn't seem like a killing offense to me. It all just seemed like a terrible waste. ♀

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ghjwintexklmopqsuvwxzabcdt
ABCDEFGHIJKL MNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

From "Winter Kill" AHMM, March 2004

—David Edgerley Gates

Cops say you crack a case in the first forty-eight hours, before the trail goes cold. After that, it's mostly dumb luck.

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Movie fans don't turn to film noir when they're looking for a happy ending. Desperation. Disillusionment. Dread. Doom. Even things that don't start with a "d," as long as they're bleak. That's what noir is all about.

So how ironic is this: Noir is thriving, with popular film festivals and deluxe DVD releases, paying tribute to the once-neglected field. "Film noir" might be French for "black film," but the genre's future is looking bright.

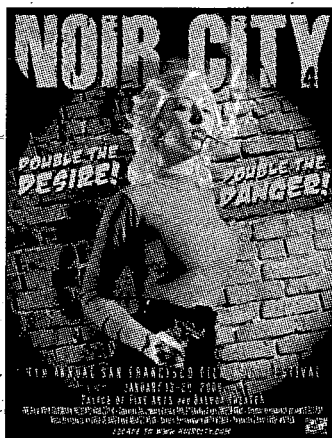
"This is the best time to be a film noir fan," says novelist and noir historian Eddie Muller, who's been such an effective booster for the genre he's been dubbed "The Czar of Noir."



Eddie Muller

"From the time I first heard about [downbeat road-trip-to-hell cheapie] *Detour* to the time I finally got to see it was about six years. Today, it would be six minutes."

Muller's part of the reason previously obscure crime pictures like *Detour* have found a second life. His first book on the genre, *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir*, led to an invitation to



program a major noir film festival in Los Angeles in 1999. Seven years later, the festival's still going strong: It's an April tradition at the

American Cinema-theque's

Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood. In 2003, Muller launched another popular festival in his hometown, San Francisco. Called "Noir City," the annual event (held January 13-24 this year) regularly draws crowds of more than 1,000 for screenings of both famous favorites (such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Sunset Boulevard*) and little-known

gems (such as *He Walked by Night* and *The Man Who Cheated Himself*).

"In a sense, I'm a little surprised that it continues to grow like this," says Muller (who's written two other books on noir and recently co-authored the tell-all memoir *Tab Hunter Confidential*). "The fourth year I did the festival in L.A., I thought, Geez, are we maxed out? But no. In fact, the festival in L.A. was way ahead of the curve."



The Man Who Cheated Himself

And ahead of other festivals, too: In addition to Noir City in San Francisco, new noir fests have recently sprung up in Portland, Palm Springs, and St. Petersburg. (Seattle, on the other hand, was ahead of everyone: The Seattle Art Museum has been hosting an annual noir series for nearly thirty years.)

Of course, even with retrospectives popping up in art-house theaters and museums across the country, not everyone will have the chance to see these classic crime films on the big screen. But thanks to a new boom in noir titles on DVD, anybody can program their own private film festival. Both Warner Bros. and 20th Century Fox have launched major noir series, releasing restored and remastered versions of classics like *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Set-Up*, and *The Narrow Margin* (through Warner's Film Noir Classic Collection line) and *Laura*, *Nightmare Alley*, and *Kiss of Death* (through the Fox Film Noir line). In addition to the usual bonus features, such as vintage trailers and behind-the-scenes documentaries, many of the DVDs also feature commentary tracks recorded by noir experts—including, of course, the Czar of Noir himself.

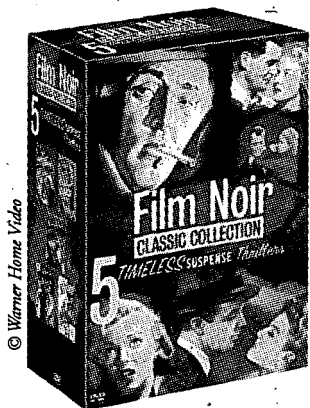
"DVDs have changed everything," says Muller (who's also known for his noir-ish, critically acclaimed mystery novels). "When I was working on *Dark City*, it was really hard to find these movies. I did it mostly through a network of movie fans who taped stuff when it was on television. I was getting tapes of movies that were made off TV in the 1970s. *Nightmare Alley* was shown once on American Movie Classics in the early '90s and was immediately withdrawn, and years later you'd see the tape show up on eBay for hundreds of dollars." Muller pauses to chuckle. "How stupid do those people feel now?"

Though he's pleased that no one has to shell out big bucks for bootleg tapes anymore, Muller hopes film buffs won't take noir for granted once they've seen sampled the genre on DVD. As he sees it, true noir fans shouldn't be content with small-screen



viewing when the big-screen festivals can offer something more.

"DVDs almost make it too easy. You can just stick a movie in, watch it for an hour, then finish it later," Muller points out. "I want people to experience these films the way they were meant to be seen: in a theater with an audience. That moment when the lights go down and the music starts—you can't match that in your living room."



Coaxing viewers away from their remote controls isn't the only challenge Muller faces when preparing his latest film festival. He also has to hunt down usable prints of movies that, in many cases, haven't been screened publicly in years.

"When I first started programming these things, it became apparent that there were some films we just couldn't get, and that really bugged me," he says. "How could a movie just disappear?"

To keep any more movies from disappearing—and hopefully bring some lost flicks back from oblivion—Muller founded the Film Noir Foundation, a non-profit organization devoted to locating and restoring 35mm prints of hard-to-find noir titles. The foundation's also begun drawing up plans for taking Noir City on the road, bringing film festivals to more cities nationwide.

So though noir was once merely a fannish fixation for Muller (who got hooked on it in his teen years, when he would occasionally skip school to catch a genre classic on TV), now it's something closer to a full-time job.

"Originally, I just wanted to walk in [to the festivals], introduce the movies, and let somebody else do all the hard work," sighs Muller, who serves as the Film Noir Foundation's president. "Well, those were the good old days."

Not that Muller's complaining. When it comes to those rare happy endings in noir, his might be the happiest of them all.

"Every now and then the phone rings and someone says, 'We're doing a film noir festival. Can you come here and flap your gums?'" Muller says. "They pay my way, they put me up in a hotel, and all I have to do is b.s. about great movies. Who can beat that?"

So you've seen *The Big Sleep*. You've seen *The Maltese Falcon*. You've seen film noir, right?

Wrong. Though often lumped in with noir, hardboiled detective movies are actually a subgenre all their own.

"A crime has to be committed [as in mystery/hardboiled pictures], but the thing that makes noir noir is that generally the story is told from the point of view of the person committing the crime," the Czar of Noir explains. "They are stories about flawed, morally compromised protagonists or protagonists who are screwed by a horribly indifferent world. So basically it comes down to you're screwed either way."

In addition to their thematic gloominess, noir films also usually feature shadow-heavy, expressionistic cinematography, and most were made in the two decades following World War II.

Still not sure what's noir and what's not? Muller recommends the following five films (all now available on DVD) for anyone looking for a crash course in noir.

Out of the Past (1947): Big lug Robert Mitchum crosses gangster Kirk Douglas for the love of beautiful Jane Greer, and the results are anything but pretty.

Criss Cross (1949): Big lug Burt Lancaster crosses gangster Dan Duryea for the love of beautiful Yvonne De Carlo, and the results are . . . you get the idea.

Scarlet Street (1945): Four years before *Criss Cross*, Duryea played another manipulative crook, this time using a beautiful girl (Joan Bennett) to lure a henpecked wannabe painter (Edward G. Robinson) into a life of crime.

Detour (1945): The unluckiest hitchhiker in the world (Tom Neal) hooks up with the nastiest hitchhiker in the world (Ann Savage), and together they hop a ride to Destruction.

Double Indemnity (1944): Lust-addled sap Fred MacMurray helps femme fatale Barbara Stanwyck bump off her husband in this 1944 adaptation of a James M. Cain novel. With a screenplay by Raymond Chandler and director Billy Wilder, what could go wrong? The film-to-video transfer on the original 1998 DVD release leaves much to be desired, but reportedly an improved collector's edition DVD is in the works—yet another sign that noir fans have plenty to be cheerful about these days.



Double Indemnity



DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 49. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the March issue. The solution to last month's puzzle is on page 139.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Blackball	97	200	65	46	151	205	184	9	85
B. Until now: 2 wds.	162	135	145	34	110	3			
C. Put the kibosh on, in a way	121	163	79	39	178	68	104	161	
D. Secret society member: 2 wds.	171	105	48	86	147	59	191	127	174
E. Eclipses, e.g.	116	84	10	88	57	150	140	169	29
F. Scandinavian canine	149	176	194	2	36	20	204	63	
G. Sharp-beaked avian	50	155	21	195	99	44	109	188	
H. System introduced in 1963: 2 wds.	185	13	117	32	92	129	55		
I. Scorn: 2 wds.	93	137	5	182	28	23	72	62	
J. Found	106	120	75	125	123	31	69	187	38
K. General's activity	143	47	70	76	189	133	80	98	18
L. Big-ticket purchase, at times	202	42	128	186	112	26	40	73	122 156
M. Ancient Syrian	134	111	141	51	16	102	66		
N. Picture	199	119	41	7	154	175	77	126	
O. Seasoned relish	67	114	196	12	27	146	192	56	
P. Old place of amuse- ment: 2 wds.	58	165	159	4	45	91	190	181	61 25
Q. Soundness	87	153	1	64	166	24	96	107	170

	1	Q	2	F	3	B		4	P	5	I	6	X	7	N	8	R	9	A	10	E								
11	W			12	O	13	H	14	S	15	V	16	M	17	U	18	K		19	R	20	F	21	G					
22	T	23	I	24	Q			25	P	26	L	27	O	28	I	29	E	30	W	31	J		32	H					
33	T	34	B	35	W	36	F	37	R			38	J	39	C	40	L		41	N	42	L	43	T	44	G	45	P	
46	A	47	K	48	D			49	S	50	G	51	M	52	T		53	X	54	R	55	H		56	O	57	E		
58	P	59	D	60	T			61	P	62	I			63	F	64	Q	65	A	66	M	67	O	68	C	69	J	70	K
71	R			72	I	73	L	74	U	75	J	76	K	77	N	78	V		79	C	80	K	81	R	82	U			
83	S	84	E	85	A			86	D	87	Q	88	E	89	T	90	U		91	P	92	H	93	I	94	W	95	S	
96	Q	97	A	98	K			99	G	100	W	101	X			102	M	103	U	104	C			105	D	106	J	107	Q
108	W	109	G	110	B	111	M	112	L	113	V			114	O	115	S	116	E	117	H	118	X	119	N	120	J		
121	C	122	L			123	J	124	S			125	J	126	N			127	D	128	L	129	H			130	R	131	X
132	T			133	K	134	M	135	B			136	X	137	I	138	T		139	X	140	E	141	M	142	U	143	K	
144	T	145	B			146	O	147	D			148	S	149	F	150	E	151	A	152	U	153	Q	154	N			155	G
156	L	157	S	158	U	159	P	160	X	161	C			162	B	163	C	164	W	165	P	166	Q	167	V			168	T
169	E	170	Q	171	D	172	W	173	R			174	D	175	N	176	F	177	X			178	C	179	S	180	V	181	P
182	I	183	X	184	A	185	H	186	L			187	J	188	G	189	K	190	P	191	D	192	O	193	U	194	F		
195	G	196	O	197	U	198	W	199	N	200	A			201	V	202	L			203	R	204	F	205	A	206	V		

R. Passé: hyph. wd.

130 203 8 54 71 19 81 173 37

S. Consider

124 14 83 179 148 95 115 49 157

T. Potomac feeder

138 33 144 43 89 132 60 52 168 22

U. White Persian

193 82 152 17 74 103 142 90 197 158

V. Augment

206 78 167 201 15 180 113

W. Tops: 2 wds.

100 94 198 35 108 11 164 172 30

X. Beguiled

160 183 53 136 139 131 6 177 118 101

GIFTED

VICKY WOODWARD

“You’re making a big mistake if you hire Beth Collins,” Jessica told her husband.

“Didn’t I tell you I didn’t want to have this conversation?” Sam said.

“I can see it as clear as day.”

“This is what you need to ‘see,’ ” he said, putting little air quotes around his last word, his razor bobbing in his right hand. “I’d have to be a fool to take your advice again, Jessica. And you know why.”

Here it comes, she thought.

“Because of you and your ‘gift,’ ” he continued, without the air quotes but with an annoying emphasis—“because you can ‘see’ things”—more emphasis—“I nearly lost my business!”

Guess what? You’re going to lose a lot more than your business, my dear husband, Jessica thought, but said nothing. Events were in motion. He’d learn what the future had in store for him in all due time. Why spoil his morning? Let him shave.

“So,” he continued, “just cease and desist with the psychic nonsense.”

“Fine,” she said.

“Not just this morning, not just this time—forever.”

“Fine,” she said. It wasn’t what she thought, but it was what she said. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” he said, and returned to shaving.

“But it’s going to be bad.”

“You can’t stop!”

“Because if you hire Beth something will happen!”

“Of course something will happen!” The razor slashed the air. “She’ll bring us her family’s accounts and I’ll make a ton of money!”

“No—something bad,” she said.

“Jessica, you may recall that this is my law firm. It’s not yours, it’s mine.”

Technically, no, but who was she to stand on a legal technicality?

“My father established it, not yours.”

So she’d heard. Many times.

“And he left it to just me and David. Not you.” Sam pointed his

razor toward her as he continued his case against her. "Just me and my brother. Can you 'see' what that means?"

He could be so arrogant. No wonder he was one of the best trial attorneys in Dallas.

"I can see you missed a spot," she said, gesturing.

"Don't try to be cute." He turned back to the mirror. "Get this once and for all—I'm not losing my firm because of my wife. The firm's the most important thing in my life."

"The most important thing?"

"Don't pick at my words," he said. "You know what I mean."

She stared at her husband standing in his imported underwear at their marble wash basin and chose her words carefully.

"You're too infatuated with what's on the surface to see the way things really are."

He slapped the razor sharply against the side of the sink.

"The way things really are? Let's talk about the way things really are. Remember Tony Barnes? Huh? Remember Tony?"

She remembered Tony.

"You told me to hire him." He scrapped the blade hard against his face. "You told me to hire him and he cost me a million dollars in damages, penalties, and interest."

It was actually just under nine hundred thousand.

He said, "That's the way things really are." He turned up the water and shook the razor beneath it. "He really cost me a million dollars."

She felt herself bristle. She was so tired of hearing that inflated number. Maybe now was the time to tell him what was headed his way. Not that he'd believe her. But at least she could get it on the record and use it someday to wipe that arrogant . . .

She stopped herself. If she couldn't be cool she could at least look cool. She forced a smile. She could bluff with the best of them. She had her own law degree, she was a seasoned trial attorney—she'd been up against the devil himself in court—and she could hold her own. Even though she was on temporary hiatus from the practice of law, she still had it.

"Everyone has an off day," she said, trying to make it sound like a joke.

"But that's all you have!" he said, humorlessly. "Like your call on Margaret. You had this 'feeling' about her. You just 'knew' she was going to be trouble."

"Would you mind," she said, "not using little quotation marks when you talk? And the story's not over yet with Margaret. Anyone paying attention knows something's going to happen with her."

"Something's going to happen with Beth and something's going

to happen with Margaret. I'm not listening to this, Jessica." He grabbed a towel and blotted frantically at his face.

"It's not about being a psychic. It's just obvious that . . ."

"Stop!" he said. "Just stop." He brushed past her and headed toward his closet. "Margaret is the best associate we have and Beth is . . ." He paused and turned around. "No. I will not do this. You and I will have no further conversations about anything or anyone connected with this law firm."

If only she could get him to swear a written statement to that effect.

"Is that what you want?"

"That's what I want."

"Then that's what you've got." Let him think she was giving up.

"This has driven me insane," he said. "Where did I put my new tie? I'm not going to be late again because of you and your crazy scenes."

"Me!" she wanted to say. "Don't for one moment blame this on . . ." But she had to maintain control. A few years before she'd seen a psychic on TV. A forensic psychic. He'd led police to a dead body. Maybe she'd do that some day. "It's in there!" This forensic psychic said he had to work constantly on stilling his emotions. "The calmer the surface, the deeper the view." She recognized it as good advice for anyone, so she started practicing.

She had nothing to get upset about, really. With what she knew was coming, there was no reason for her to worry.

Sam went into his closet to finish dressing for court. Jessica sat down on the bed and watched him. A nice view, she had to admit, which was one reason why so many women wanted him.

She wished he'd quit bringing up Tony Barnes. He knew why she'd been off her game when she made the call on Tony. It was a tough time. Anyone going through what she was going through could easily miss a signal here and there.

Sam walked out of the closet tying his tie and stopped and stared at her, a softness now in his face. She stared back. Maybe, in spite of everything that had happened, he really did love her.

"I know why you don't want me to hire Beth," he said, his voice easing up. "But you don't have anything to worry about. I'll never hurt you like that again. Never."

"I'm not afraid you'll sleep with her!" she said indignantly. She'd already dealt with that. "That's not why I don't want you to hire her." He really couldn't see anything. "I just know if you hire Beth Collins something awful is going to happen."

"Jessica, please."

"Awful," she repeated. "You're going to wish you'd listened to me."

"Look—I know what the potential liabilities with Beth are, and I know how to handle them." He put his arms around her. "You—we—have nothing to be concerned about."

"I'm just trying to help," she said.

"I know." He looked at her softly. "Look how much you helped with . . . you know . . . you know . . ."

She knew. The situation. It was just a fact, the situation, a fact they had to live with only a little while longer.

He said, "David and I are forever grateful to you for bailing us out. On that one, you might have saved the firm." He kissed the top of her head.

"I'll make you a deal," she said. "I'll never mention the decision to hire Beth again if you'll let me say just one more thing."

"Say it."

"Something big is going to happen if you hire her," she said. "I don't know exactly what," she told him, "but it's big. And it's bad."

"Duly noted." He patted her knee. "I gotta get to court."

It was around noon that day when the phone rang.

Jessica involuntarily felt herself flinch. She hated that she hated it when the phone rang. It had been over two years, and yet there was still that expectation, that infuriating expectation. What woman would it be this time? But today, instead of the call being from a spurned lover informing Jessica of how long she'd been sleeping with Sam, it was from Sam.

"We extended an offer to Beth this morning and she accepted."

Jessica remembered her promise not to mention any sense of foreboding.

"I bet she was happy."

"I don't know. David talked to her. They set up a dinner for tonight at The Mansion on Turtle Creek. I need you to attend."

"Sure," she said, always the good sport. "Sounds like fun." Tonight could be that inevitable first opportunity for her not to rub it in.

"David's going to take her out for drinks beforehand, so we'll meet them around seven."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"And I've got a surprise for you."

"I love surprises."

"Her husband's coming."

She hadn't foreseen this. No telling how his presence might impact the course of events, but why not? The more the hairier. Besides, it was always fun to meet a celebrity.

"He is?" She put a touch of delight in her voice. "Really?"

"Sure 'nuff." He seemed pleased to have made her happy. "Bring your autograph book."

At her former firm, she'd reviewed employment contracts for the Cowboys and had met more than her share of football players. It was no big whoop to her, but it was sweet that he thought so.

"I'll let him autograph my breasts," she said.

"He's a lucky man. I love you, sweetie," Sam said.

"Love you," Jessica said.

When the spurned lover had called, she hadn't wanted actually to talk with Jessica. She'd only wanted to leave a message passing her information along. So she'd placed the call in the middle of a workday thinking Jessica wouldn't be home. Jessica wasn't at home, but it wasn't because she was at work. She was out shopping, celebrating a big win from a huge trial.

She'd been in court for five weeks straight. She'd defended—and won—a big case for the firm, and the senior partner was so pleased with her performance that he'd told her not to come in for the rest of the week. It had been a shady deal—Jessica knew her clients maintained affiliations with organized crime—but she also knew that under the Constitution even the syndicate had the right to a fair trial. And "a fair trial" meant using every trick in the book she could get away with. As she'd been told at the firm, her job was not to write the law but to work the law.

So, on the day following the big verdict, when Jessica came bopping into her house after a lovely morning at Neiman Marcus—a designer facial, a designer salad for lunch, a designer dress (the cash her just-barely-grazing-the-line-of-the-law client had slipped her under the table, literally, in an eight-by-ten manila envelope had paid for the Vera Wang)—the little green light on the phone was flashing. The spurned lover's message was waiting.

Jessica hung up from the call from her husband. What would she wear that evening? Something that would obviously knock them out—the Vera Wang?—or something lesser, something that would send the message that she felt no need to send a message?

While she pondered what sort of impression to make, she heard the clank of the mailbox lid. She went and got the mail, brought it in, and flipped through it. At the bottom of the stack was an envelope. An envelope with familiar handwriting.

She opened it and read the enclosed letter. Yeah right, she thought, like I'm not psychic.

She left the rest of the mail unopened on the kitchen table and took the letter back to her bedroom.

Jessica had always prided herself on the creative outgoing mes-

sages she put on their answering machine, and the day the spurned lover called, the message was one of Jessica's best. When the machine picked up, callers initially heard that great Clapton guitar intro to "Layla." Those perfect, masterful power riffs. And just when the solo was cresting at its crescendo, Jessica's voice came on and delicately told callers, "Do you mind? Sam's practicing the guitar. You'll have to call us back."

"Honey," the woman's voice told her—yes, her husband had actually had an affair with a woman who used that word under those circumstances—"you wouldn't know what he was doing if he did it right under your nose. He's been sleeping with me for seven years, but you'll learn more about that when I file my lawsuit."

Even the best psychics don't see everything coming.

The woman's lawsuit hadn't been filed, at least not yet, but defensive measures had been immediately taken. After a hurried, however awkward, meeting with David, the three decided to transfer Sam's fifty percent ownership of the firm to Jessica in an attempt to shelter his half from the possible lawsuit.

Consequently, David and Jessica had become equal partners of the firm.

The woman probably didn't have enough hard evidence to get past a motion for summary judgment and she obviously wasn't working with an attorney. She'd mailed a couple of original hotel bills—no attorney would let their client do that—which Jessica ran through the shredder. But as the ramifications of such a case could be so devastating, and, as shielding money from creditors was one of Jessica's strong suits, the two brothers had yielded to her suggestion to transfer the shares.

And here today, as Jessica walked up the stairs to the bedroom, the statute of limitations on the woman's claims had almost tolled. In six days the clock would run out—Sam had kept close tabs on the relevant dates—and the woman would be forever barred from pursuing a lawsuit against him.

At that time, Jessica was to return the shares to Sam. Only six days remained for Jessica to be a partner in the firm.

Under the partnership agreement, should one of the partners die, those shares would go to the surviving partner. The surviving partner would then own a hundred percent of the shares. The shares couldn't be inherited.

So what would happen if Jessica died while holding the shares? They would all go to David. He would own the entire firm. If there were no other reason for Sam to want Jessica alive until the statute of limitations on the lawsuit ran, this was it.

Because Sam didn't trust David. If Jessica were to die, and David

were to get the whole firm, David, morally, should transfer Sam's original fifty percent back to him. But if he refused, Sam had no legal recourse. He couldn't go to a judge because the original scheme to avoid attachment from a lawsuit would come out. And Sam couldn't hide the fact that the possibility concerned him.

But Jessica knew the possibility of her death wasn't what most concerned Sam. What most concerned him was the possibility of her divorcing him. If she left Sam, while still owning the shares, half of one of the most prestigious law firms in Dallas would go with her. And, in this case as in the other, Sam would have no legal recourse.

While Sam may have worried about divorce while Jessica owned the shares, Jessica didn't. She knew, as long as she held those shares, Sam would be true to her and to her alone. It was an insurance policy. An insurance policy on her marriage.

Jessica loved Sam. She didn't care what had happened in the past. She loved him, and she didn't want the marriage to end.

What she wanted was a longer insurance policy.

At the top of the stairs she turned into the bedroom. She went to the wardrobe and opened the bottom drawer. She pulled the drawer all the way out, lifted it, and removed it from the cabinet.

She took the drawer to the bed and set it down. She removed its contents and turned the drawer over.

On the bottom of the drawer was taped the manila envelope she'd received that day in court from her shady client. She opened the envelope and removed the only thing now in it, a folded piece of notebook paper.

She open the paper, read it carefully, and refolded it. She slid the paper back into the envelope. She then took the letter she had received in that day's mail and slipped it also into the envelope. She resealed the envelope, put the contents into the drawer, and put the drawer back into the wardrobe.

While driving to dinner that evening, Sam told Jessica they had fired Margaret.

"Late this afternoon," Sam said. "She lost us the Foster account. First, she lied to the client, and then, when she got caught, she started yelling at him."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"At sweet old Mr. Foster?"

"Yep. I could hear her all the way in my office, and I had my door closed."

"She really lost it, huh?"

"Yep. She lost it and the Foster account, all in one psychotic fell swoop."

"Hmm."

"Go ahead and say it."

"Say what?"

"I told you so. Go ahead. Say it. I've got it coming to me."

"I'm not going to say it." Why would she? Every good trial attorney knows it's more powerful to let someone else make your point for you. "In fact, I'm not going to say 'I told you so' about this or anything else."

"But you called this one right," he said. "How did you see it coming?"

"You saw it too. You just refused to admit it." Let him save face. Let him feel good about himself. "You wanted so badly to believe that since Margaret was so brilliant she wouldn't cause trouble for you, like she had with every other firm she'd been at."

"That's true. I knew she pissed people off everywhere she went. I thought it'd miraculously be different with us."

"The obvious usually rules the day."

"I hope this doesn't mean your prediction about Beth will come true."

"No comment."

"What? That's all you've talked about for weeks."

"I told you this morning I'd never say anything else about it."

"Oh yeah." He pinched her thigh. "Good girl." He smiled at her and winked.

When they arrived at the restaurant, David and Beth were already drunk. Beth's All-Pro defensive-end husband, who had also just arrived, was stone sober and clearly unamused.

What a sight, Jessica thought. A former Miss Texas, a spoiled playboy, and a 290-pound steroidal mass all sitting at one immaculately set table. Where were the paparazzi when you needed them?

In all the years she'd known David, Jessica had never seen him this drunk, and she'd seen him plenty drunk. It was cute, she thought, in a frat boy sort of way, and, if truth be told, she was somewhat relieved to see David back in his old form, considering how morose he'd been lately. But on the other hand, his loosened exuberance did border on being a bit much amidst the elegant décor and hushed conversations. How long had he and Beth been at it?

David made the introductions, stumbling twice over Marcus Kondonassis's name before waving off his slurred attempts and

telling everyone to just call him "Kondi." At this, Beth gave David a girlish giggle, and at that, Marcus Kondonassis gave David a line-of-scrimmage showdown glare. The steel in the big man's eyes chilled Jessica; his intensity was tangible. So that's what it's like, Jessica thought, when professional roid heads coil for action. David didn't notice. David never noticed anything. It wasn't the booze; that's just how he was. He continued his uninhibited introductions, ending with Jessica.

"And this," David said, taking her hand and stroking the tops of her fingers, "is the true rose of Texas, the fair Jessica."

He'd always been full of it. Jessica smiled professionally and greeted everyone at the table. She gingerly released her hand and patted her brother-in-law on the shoulder.

"Wow," she said. "Maybe I married the wrong brother."

It drew polite chuckles, and she was relieved when Sam pulled out the chair away from David for her to sit in.

No one knew why David had been acting so weird lately. He'd been difficult and distant, and several had commented on it. There was a rumor going around the office that David was involved with a married woman. That was no news flash. David had been involved with plenty of married women. He was responsible for more divorces—and more strained marriages for those who'd stayed together afterward—than anyone since Warren Beatty. The carnage he'd left in his wake was the stuff of legends. But, according to the current rumor, this one he wanted for his own.

Jessica looked at Beth, who was snorting she was laughing so hard at a joke David had made. Good God, Jessica thought, she is so beautiful. Flawless. Someone had said grown men had been known to cry when she walked into the room. Beth was a stupid drunk but a gorgeous woman. Then it occurred to Jessica.

She glanced over at Sam—she gave him the look—and he leaned toward her.

"Is it Beth?" Jessica whispered.

"What?"

"The married woman."

Sam's face registered his sudden recognition. "Oh my God."

The first two courses couldn't have crept by more slowly. If time is moving too fast, Jessica thought, just have a dinner with a couple having an affair and her cuckold husband. Were David and Beth aware of Marcus Kondonassis's noticeable reactions to them?

Before the appetizers had arrived, David had told a lawyer joke. Of all the many lawyer jokes, why that one?

"What happens when lawyers take Viagra?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"They grow taller!"

Sam and Jessica laughed appropriately, Marcus Kondonassis remained intensely stoic, but Beth looked perplexed.

"I don't get it," she said. "They grow . . ." Suddenly a smile lit upon her face. "They're pricks!" She almost shouted it. "Lawyers are pricks!"

It was pathetic. She was beautiful but pathetic. She couldn't let the joke die. As the night dragged on, Beth kept making the same toast over and over. She'd raise her glass and say, "Here's to lawyers. They're pricks!" Each time she said it, it was as though she didn't realize that she'd said it before and that no one but David toasted with her and that her husband's jaw clinched tighter with each salutation.

The dinner had become The David and Beth Show. Were they aware that anyone else was at the table? Bad joke, loud laugh, bad joke, loud laugh, bad joke, loud laugh. Jessica had never been so uncomfortable in her life. Would someone make them stop ordering more alcohol? And, if things weren't bad enough, Marcus Kondonassis had started matching them drink for drink.

The main course had just arrived when it happened. Jessica was eating as fast as she could, hoping no one would order dessert, when David said it—

He said he was looking forward to having Beth work under him. And they both laughed.

Marcus Kondonassis pounded his fist on the table.

"What the hell does that mean?" It seemed like he'd suddenly grown even bigger.

"What the hell does what mean, Kondi?" David asked, the frat boy at play.

"You know what I'm talking about!" His All-Pro anger escalating.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," David said, showing no signs of awareness.

"Waiter," Sam called. "Could we get the check?"

"You've been way outta line with my wife all night." Marcus was yelling, the roid-rage taking form. "Just what the hell are you after?" He shot a showdown glare at David.

David shot a blurry gaze of slow comprehension back at him.

"You want to know what I'm after? I'll tell you what I'm after."

This is going way wrong. Jessica's mind was racing. Should she do something? Was he going to admit it?

David then leaned sloppily across Beth and actually poked Marcus Kondonassis in the chest.

"I'm after"—poke poke—"the woman I love."

Marcus didn't say another word but sprang, hitting the table and sending glasses and plates flying.

Jessica jumped up and back. Marcus tried to leap across the table and grab David, but David dodged just enough that Marcus picked up the table and threw it, literally threw the table off to the side, and lunged for David. Just in time Sam pushed David out of the line of fire and Marcus landed on the next table over.

Marcus pulled himself up and was about to take another run at David—probably catching Sam in the wake—but almost instantly the area swarmed with men, employees of the restaurant, who know how to control a situation. Within a few seconds, everyone was pulled far apart and Marcus was restrained.

Sam looked at Jessica, his face distorted with wild questions and mad understanding. With her heart pounding and her mind reeling, all she could say was, "I told you so."

That night Jessica couldn't sleep. Her husband had tossed and turned for over an hour, but finally she heard the rhythmic breathing of his slumber. Jessica lay in bed and stared at the ceiling.

She knew it wasn't over. Not yet.

The call from the police came just after sunrise. Jessica answered. "This is Sergeant Foley with the Dallas Police Department." The words no one wants to hear. "Is Sam Reid in?"

"Yes." Jessica tried to remain calm. "Just one minute."

Had it happened? Had it really happened? No matter how much you know something is coming, when you get the call, you can't help feeling surprised.

Sam had woken up. She held out the receiver to him.

"It's the police."

Sam took the phone. Jessica listened as Sam made the predictable utterances of surprise, of disbelief, answering questions, asking for proof of certainty, making sure he had the information correct.

"Thank you for calling, Officer." He was remarkably composed. "I'll be right down."

He handed the phone back to Jessica.

"David's been murdered," he said.

"Oh my God!" Jessica said. "Where? How?"

"A janitor found him early this morning in an elevator at the office."

"Oh my God! Was he already dead?"

"I don't know. He'd been shot. Once. Right in the back of the head. Small caliber bullet."

"Do they know who did it?"

"They think it was a professional hit. He asked me if David was involved with anyone who could have him killed."

"Oh my God. Do you think it was Beth's husband?"

"I don't know. I don't know what to think. I've got to go down there."

Jessica could see that although Sam was in shock, he was functional. He'd gone into his ultraprofessional mode, his I-can-handle-this mode.

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No. Stay here. There'll be a lot of people calling. If the press calls, tell them you have no comment."

Sam got dressed and left the house without showering. Jessica watched from the kitchen window as his car pulled out of the driveway and drove down the street. She waited a few minutes longer, just to make sure he wouldn't return for something he might have forgotten, and then she went back upstairs to the bedroom.

She went to the wardrobe, pulled out the bottom drawer, set it on the bed, and removed its contents. She turned the drawer over and removed the manila envelope taped to the bottom. She pulled out the two items it contained—the letter she'd received the day before and the folded piece of paper.

She opened the letter and read it again.

*Dear Jessica,
Since you've refused to take my calls or answer my e-mails, I've decided to send you this letter.*

I won't wait any longer. I know you love me, and I know we were meant to be together. I don't care that fate played this awful trick on us and you are married to my brother. Whatever it took to bring us together, I accept. But I will no longer accept our being apart.

I'm going to tell Sam about us. I know it will be tough, but there is no reason to postpone the inevitable.

I'm giving you one week to tell him on your own terms, but after that, I'm taking the matter into my own hands.

All my love, David.

She set the letter down and picked up the folded piece of paper, opened it, and read the phone number one last time.

The affair was revenge.

The hit was insurance.

She considered the money she paid for the hit to be the premium required for her to switch from term to whole life.

She'd never need that phone number again.

She stood up and took both items to the shredder. ♡

LUCK IS NO LADY

Frankie hung onto the bar with both hands. If he let go, he might fall down. He didn't want to pass out, because this old Professor guy was talking to him. If he listened, maybe the old boy would keep on buying the drinks.

"Luck," said the old Professor guy. "That's what makes all the difference in the world. Five years ago I was a respected member of the faculty here at the university. Today, owing to the vicissitudes of fortune—"

He paused and sighed. Frankie sighed, too. "I know what you mean," Frankie said. "I ain't used to being on the bum myself." Which was a lie, because Frankie had always been a bum. But he wanted to stay friendly; he wanted another drink. And sure enough, the old guy was signalling the bartender. He pulled out a half-dollar and held it up in the air.

"Heads or tails," the Professor said. "Who can tell which it will be when I drop this coin on the bar? I can't. You can't. And neither can the bartender. A mathematician will say the chances are even, either way. Professor Rhine will tell you the odds can be modified. But no one knows. And there you have the Mystery of the Universe. None of us can foresee what luck will bring. Behold!"

Frankie had his eyes in focus now and he watched the coin drop. It hit the bar, bounced, then stood still—balanced on edge.

"Luck!" chuckled the old Professor guy. "Sheer luck, operating all around us, governing every move of our lives. If Lincoln had stooped to tie his shoe-lace at the moment Booth fired his shot—if the bird had not appeared when Columbus faced the mutineers—if! But we're all victims of Tyche."

"Tight," Frankie said. "I know I'm tight."

"You misunderstand. I was speaking of Tyche. Fortuna, the Romans called her. One of the Fates, a sister of the Parcae."

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"Never met the dame."

"I can well imagine that." The old Professor guy smiled at Frankie over his glass. "But the ancients realized her importance. They held an annual festival in her honor. June twenty-fourth, I believe, was the date. I've seen her represented with a cornucopia in her hands, standing on a ball—"

"Let's have a ball," Frankie muttered. "One more drink and I'm gonna be all set for a ball."

"You shouldn't drink so much," the old guy told him.

Frankie shrugged. "Why not? What else is there to do? I ain't never had the breaks, not once. Look at me—a lousy, washed-up wino. I shake like an old man, and I'm only thirty-three. If I just got a decent chance—"

The Professor guy was nodding. "I know," he said. "I could tell you a similar story. And so could every man. One man takes his last hundred dollars and buys a shack on the beach—six months later they find him there, dead of starvation. Another does the same thing—six months later they strike oil on the shore, and he sells his property for a million plus royalties. One man walks down the street and finds a fat wallet in the gutter. Another walks down the same street a moment later, just in time to be hit by a falling cornerstone. Fortune is a fickle goddess, my friend. But who knows? Being fickle, she may reverse her attitude and visit you with wealth and happiness."

"Nuts!" said Frankie.

"There speaks the scientific mind," said the old Professor guy. "But I'm not so sure. If I could only learn the secret of what attracts Fortune, I'd ask for nothing else. Perhaps it's just a matter of real belief, or of worship. Fortune is a goddess and goddesses demand adoration. Being female, she requires constancy. Could it be that the so-called fortunate ones are merely those who have learned this secret and swear fealty to Fortune in return for her favors?"

"I dunno," Frankie mumbled. "Me, I'd go all-out for any dame who'd change my luck."

He picked up his glass, swallowed, then turned. But the old Professor guy had stumbled out. The bartender came up, shaking his head. "Funny how it hits them all of a sudden," he said.

"Yeah," Frankie answered. "But what gets me is why a guy like him hangs around this joint."

"I dunno about that," the bartender said. "We get some pretty classy trade, on account of the game in back."

Then Frankie remembered. Sure, there was a back room here. Roulette, dice, the works. He'd never been back there because he

never had a stake. But come to think of it, people had been crowding through all evening, passing behind him. Like the baldheaded jerk walking by now, and the college boy with the glasses, and the dame in red.

The dame in red—there was a real item!

Frankie hadn't paid any attention to dames for a couple of months now. When you're really on the juice, you get so dames don't interest you. But this one did.

She wore this red sort of evening dress, and her skin was white as marble, and her hair was jet black. Jet black, like her eyes. She looked at Frankie when she passed, and she smiled.

She smiled at *him*. The way he looked mustn't have bothered her.

Frankie was high, or he'd never have done it. But he was high, so he floated after her. Floated to the door of the back room and stood behind her while the eye looked her over and gave the nod. And Frankie went right through to the back with her—the eye didn't try to stop him. In fact, Frankie had an idea the eye was looking at *him* more than at her.

The room in back was bigger than he'd thought, and they had quite a layout. That crummy bar up front was only a blind. This was the McCoy—three big tables for roulette and four pool tables in the corners, for dice. And there must have been fifty people at least.

It was smoky back there, but not noisy. Even the dice-players were quiet, and when the wheel was spinning at a table you could notice the sound of the ball clicking. Frankie followed the dame in red over to one of the roulette tables. Lots of fat faces here, well-dressed citizens with plenty of moola. Big piles of chips in front of some. Little piles in front of others. And the wheel in the middle turning, the wheel with the 36 numbers and the 0 and the double-0, the wheel with the red and the black. Every time it turned, some of the piles would get smaller and other ones would get bigger.

Why?

Here it was, the thing the old Professor had been blabbing about. Fortune. Luck.

Some of the guys must have had a G or more in chips in front of them, and they kept on winning. Some of the others kept on losing and buying more: a dollar for whites, ten for reds, twenty for blues.

But win or lose, everybody was excited. Frankie could feel it coming off them in waves, the excitement around the table. Everybody watched every spin, every play. He watched too, and felt the pressure. If only he had a stake now!

He looked over at the dame in red. She wasn't playing either, just standing and looking, same as him. Not quite the same, because she wasn't excited. Frankie could tell from the way she stood there, like a statue, sort of. Nobody else paid any attention to her, even though she was the hottest-looking dish in the joint. You'd think they didn't even know she was there, the way they ignored her and kept their eyes on the table, on the little silver ball bouncing around on the rim of the wheel.

And she watched, but her eyes never changed. She didn't clench her fists or breathe hard or even look interested, really. It was almost as if she knew who was going to win and who was going to lose.

Frankie stared at her, stared hard. All at once she turned her head and looked at him again. Those eyes were like a couple of black stones. He wanted to look away, but she looked away first. Her eyes glanced down at the floor.

Frankie bent over to see what she was looking at. And then he noticed it.

There was a chip lying there, right at his feet. It must have fallen off somebody's stack. Frankie bent over and picked it up, held it in his hand. A blue chip—twenty bucks. He could cash it in right now. There was some luck for you!

He started to look around for one of the cashiers who went through the crowd with their little boxes strapped on, but he couldn't spot one. And the stick was going into his act. "Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen—"

Why not? Twenty bucks found, that was luck. And maybe luck would hold. Twenty could get you forty. But which should he play, the red or the black?

Frankie looked over at the dame again. She had a red dress, that was a hunch. But her hair was black and her eyes were black. The black eyes were staring at him now—

Sure, he'd play the black. Frankie started to put his chip down, but his hand wasn't steady and the chip got away from him. It rolled and landed smack on number 33.

He made a move to reach out, but the stick said, "The bank is closed" and the wheel was spinning, and all he could do was stand there and watch. Twenty bucks tossed away like nothing, a rotten piece of luck. The wheel went round and round, the ball went round and round, the room went round and round.

The ball stopped. The wheel stopped. And the room stopped too, so Frankie could hear the stick saying, "Thirty-three, black."

His number!

Then it started. The stick pushed this big stack of chips his way.

And the dame in red smiled, so he put half the chips back on red. Red came up. He left the stack there and red came up again. Three straight wins in a row and he couldn't lose.

But the dame in red shook her head and edged away from the table, so he scooped all his chips together and gave them to the cashier. The cashier paid him off in twenties and fifties and hundreds. Three thousand and twenty bucks, cash!

Frankie stuffed it into his pockets, hurrying through the crowd because he wanted to see the dame again, thank her, maybe even give her a split.

The eye held the door open for him and the dame walked out ahead, and he called, "Hey, wait a minute!" and the eye looked at him.

"What's that, buddy?"

"I wasn't talking to you," Frankie said. "I was talking to the dame."

"What dame?" asked the eye.

Frankie didn't answer, because he could see her going out the front door of the tavern. He caught up with her on the corner. The fresh air hit him, made him feel slightly sick, but he floated over to her and said, "Thanks. You brought me luck."

She just smiled, and in the dim light her eyes were darker than ever.

"Here." He scooped out a handful of bills. "I figure you got this coming."

She didn't take the money.

"I mean it," Frankie said. "Go ahead." Then he stopped. "What's the matter, you deaf or something?"

No answer. That was it, all right. Imagine a classy dame like that, deaf. But couldn't they read your lips?

"Where you headed for?" Frankie asked her. Still no answer.

Maybe the dame was a dummy, too. No wonder she didn't have any boyfriend.

"Wanna come with me?" Frankie asked. It didn't make sense that she would—a dame like her being picked up by a crumby bum. But nothing made sense any more; besides, he was too tired for sense. All he knew was that he had to get some rest and sober up. If she wanted to come with him, let her. Nobody'd say anything at the fleabag where he stayed. But he had to sleep now, had to.

He began to walk and sure enough, she followed him. Not a sound out of her, not even the clicking of high heels, because she was wearing sandals. No rings, no jewelry to clank. A beautiful dish, but like a statue.

And she stood like a statue in the middle of his dirty room.

Was she waiting for him to make a pass at her? All he knew was that he was tired, terribly tired. He dragged himself across the room, plopped down on the bed. He knew he couldn't stop himself from falling . . .

He must have slept that way all night, with his head in her lap. And she must have just sat there, not sleeping. Because it was morning now and she was looking down at him and smiling.

She smiled while he washed and shaved and changed into his other shirt. He tried to talk to her again, but she didn't answer. Just smiled and waited, waited until he put on his coat and picked up his hat.

"Come on," he said. "I'm hungry."

They went downstairs and out onto the street. Frankie was going into the Ace Lunch until he remembered he had three grand in his pocket. Why not eat in one of those nice big restaurants over on Main? But he couldn't go to a place like that, looking the way he did.

"Wait a minute," he told her. "I got shopping to do, first."

She waited, smiled and waited, while he went into the Hub and bought himself an outfit. Everything from shoes up to a twenty-dollar hat. The readymade fitted perfectly and he looked like a million bucks for only a hundred and thirty.

The clerk was plenty polite, but he ignored the dame. Frankie didn't notice this so much, but afterwards in the restaurant the waitress acted the same way—brought him a glass of water and a menu, but nothing for her.

But it turned out she wouldn't eat anything, anyhow. He pointed at the menu and she just shook her head.

So he ended up eating alone. Then he sat back and tried to figure things out. Here he was with almost three grand still in his pocket. But he had her, too. Miss can't-hear, Miss can't-talk, Miss won't-sleep, Miss won't-eat. How about that, now?

She smiled at him and Frankie smiled back, but he was beginning to wonder. Sure, she brought him luck, but there was something screwy about her—something awful screwy. He'd have to find a way to shake her before he got in some kind of trouble.

He walked out of the restaurant and she tagged along. Usually he headed for a park-bench in the morning, but now as he got ready to cross the street he stopped. The dame was holding his arm and looking up at a sign. ACME METAL PRODUCTS COMPANY. So what?

There was another sign in the front window of the building. She was staring at it. MEN WANTED.

He tried to take another step, but she held him. And now she was pointing. Frankie blinked. Was that what she meant? Did she figure on him going in there and asking for a job?

He could, of course. That'd been his line years ago. Still had his social security card, and he could probably get back in the union somehow, even in spite of the bum rap on him. But how could she know that? And what made her think he'd go back to being a working stiff, now that he had all that dough in his kick?

So Frankie shook his head. But she kept right on smiling and her arm kept right on tugging at his sleeve.

All at once he got an idea. "Okay," he said. "I'll do it. But you wait here." He pointed to the doorway, and sure enough, she walked over and stood there. He brushed past her to go inside and she gave him a big smile.

Once he got inside, Frankie started to smile, too. He knew what to do now. This joint must have a back entrance. He'd just slip out the other way. Simple.

Only this guy was standing in the hall, and he spotted Frankie and said, "You a machinist 'r a metalworker?"

"Coremaker," Frankie said. It slipped out natural, before he could stop it. "But I'm not union—"

"Neither is this plant, buddy. Come on in, fill out an application. Got a rush order, the boss's crying for help, and this town's murder when it comes to getting experienced—"

Before he knew it, the guy had him in the office and a fat character named Chesley was handing him a form.

Frankie was getting ready to tell him off, when the door opened behind him.

They came in fast, two of them, walking like a couple of wound-up toys. Both of them had bandanas over their mouths. They must have put them on outside in the hall, before they'd pulled their rods. Their rods were out now, and pointing. And one of them said, from under his bandana, "Stick 'em up and don't move."

There was Frankie and Chesley and an old bookkeeper guy and the man who'd brought him into the office. They all got their hands up in a hurry.

"Over against the wall," said the first bandana-mouth. "Make it snappy." He walked over to the big wall-safe and waited.

They started moving. The old bookkeeper guy looked like he was ready to pass out. In fact, all at once, he did pass out.

"Catch him!" Chesley yelled. "He's got a bad heart!"

Both of the bandana-mouths turned and watched him fall. Frankie was watching, too. He didn't notice the big wastebasket in front of him until he walked right into it.

The basket went over with a clatter and rolled. It hit one of the gungles in the shins. Frankie stumbled because of his encounter with the basket and fell forward. He grabbed for something to hang onto. And that turned out to be the nearest gunman's neck. All at once this fellow and Frankie were down on the floor in a heap and Frankie saw the gun in front of him. He reached for it because he was so scared he couldn't think to do something sensible like not grabbing the gun.

The other crook saw him grab for it and he jerked away from the safe. Just then the rolling wastebasket hit him in the shins. This startled him and he gave out a yell and turned. But now his back was to Chesley, and Chesley jumped him. Frankie got this crook's gun away from him, with a hard crack on the wrist, and covered both of the men while Chesley turned on the burglar-alarm.

There was plenty of excitement for the next half-hour. When the cops got through talking to Frankie, there were reporters. When the reporters got through, there was Chesley again, and Frankie never did have to fill out that form.

Chesley was delighted that Frankie would be working for him, starting tomorrow.

Frankie was so confused he ended up walking out the front door. By the time he realized what he was doing it was too late to turn around. And there she was. She had been waiting for him all this time, and now she spotted him.

Like the old Professor guy said, everything was luck. The roulette wheel, and stumbling over the wastebasket, and now this job and a new, decent life ahead of him. Blind luck.

He stared at her. Now what? She was always around when things happened.

Frankie asked her to come to him with a jerk of his head, and she smiled. They walked down the street together and he bought some luggage and then he went into the Ardmoor and took a furnished suite, just like that. Two hundred clams a month, but no questions asked. The clerk didn't even look at *her*, and the bellboy took them up without a word, or even a know-it-all grin.

He flipped the kid a half dollar and then sat down on the bed. She stood in the center of the room and smiled.

"This is it, huh, kid? Well, make yourself at home."

He tried to light a cigarette, but it got on his nerves to see her just sitting there, smiling like a statue carved out of stone. Maybe the dame was feeble-minded . . .

What he needed was a drink. A nice little drink before dinner. There was a cocktail lounge right downstairs in the Ardmoor, one

of those high-class places, all dim and quiet. Peaceful as a church. A place where you could relax and drink.

Frankie stood up. "Wait here a minute," he said. "I'm gonna go down to the lobby and buy a paper."

She didn't try to stop him—just smiled.

He walked downstairs and into the lounge. The bartender asked him what'll it be and Frankie almost said, "Glass of musky," before he remembered he didn't have to drink rotgut muscatel wine any more.

"Rye on the rocks," he said.

It tasted good.

"Do it again," Frankie told the guy.

The guy did it. And this one tasted good, too. Everything was good here. The nice, soft darkness and the nice soft music in the background. A guy could relax.

"The same," Frankie said to the bartender.

He was feeling better and better. Why not? With his luck, nothing could go wrong. Not even with the dame.

Or *because* of the dame.

It hit him on the third drink. It had been in the back of his mind all along, and with the third drink it didn't seem so crazy. The dame in red was Lady Luck.

"Hit 'er again!" Frankie said to the bartender.

What had the old Professor guy said? Maybe if you believed in her enough, she'd come to you. And he'd sort of had that feeling last night. It was screwy, but then luck is always screwy. Like the Professor said, some guys get all the breaks and others always wind up with the wrong end of the stick.

Sense or not, it had happened to him. He had Lady Luck right where he wanted her, on his side.

"One more," Frankie said.

It was the strangest, greatest feeling in the world, just sitting there and knowing that luck was with him now, smiling on him. Blind luck, dumb luck, but always smiling. Ready to give him everything and anything he wanted.

Frankie began to think about all the things he'd wanted during all the years he'd been wanting. One of those snazzy English cars. A place up in the woods maybe, with a private lake for fishing. And when he'd been in stir, he'd wanted a blonde more than he'd wanted anything else. Like that one sitting over there at the end of the bar.

She was a tall dame with bare legs. She had one of those fancy cigarette-holders and there was class written all over her. Kind of a doll Frankie'd never even had the nerve to look at twice.

But now, why not? Things were different now. He had luck with him. If he wanted something, he could have it. Maybe *she* sent the blonde on purpose, knowing how he felt.

That was it. All he had to do was lean over and say, "How about a drink, baby?" Or maybe, "Would you care for a drink?" That would sound better, classier.

Sure it sounded classier, and it worked, too. She was moving over. Frankie stood up, feeling a little dizzy, and helped her onto the stool. Then he sat down again and had another and he felt fine, just fine.

He kept feeling better and better. Easy to talk, now. Her name was Margot. Not Margaret, but Margot. Only you said it, "Margo." The "t" was silent. Silent like the dame in red, waiting upstairs. Maybe he ought to get back to her. But what for? She didn't eat; you don't have to feed Luck. Luck was free, everything was free and easy now.

It was easy to talk to Margot, too. Easy to tell her how lucky he was. How everything he touched turned to gold, like this King Midas or whatever the guy's name was they named that flour after.

So Frankie told her, and they drank, and he said how he'd just moved in and how he'd foiled the robbery today and how he'd won all that dough last night. Only this was just the beginning, wait and see.

She said she'd like that—waiting and seeing. She called him "Frankie-boy," and said she was afraid she was getting just a wee bit drunkie.

Then the bar started filling up. And Frankie said how's for getting a bottle and taking it up to his room and drinking in peace?

And she said oh she didn't know about a thing like that, but he could see she was only stalling, and sure enough she finally said yes.

So the bartender wrapped a bottle and she carried it because it was hard for him to walk. And they went up the stairs and he leaned on her and he could feel how warm her skin was under her sleeve and he knew this was it, this was what he wanted more than anything.

But in the hall he remembered and told her to wait right where she was for a minute. He went around a corner and down a corridor until he came to his door.

Frankie unlocked it. *She* was still sitting there, smiling at him—hadn't moved a muscle since he left.

He stumbled over to her and he said, "Thanks. Thanks a million. But you gotta get out now or she'll see you. We wanna be alone, understand?"

She just sat there, not hearing. So he yelled it at her. And then he pulled her up and pushed her over to the door. It was like lugging a statue, but he made it. And he headed her down the hall past the turn in the corridor, hoping she wouldn't see the blonde.

Only she must have, because she looked at him and stopped smiling. She stood there and her black eyes got that stony stare in them as she looked right through him.

He tried to grin and gave her a little push. "Go on," he said. "Come back tomorrow. Tha'sa good girl."

Then she was walking away and Frankie was walking away, back around the corridor to pick up the blonde and steer her into his room.

"Who were you talking to?" Margot asked. "Yourself?"

"Never mind," said Frankie.

She didn't mind and they had a drink together. And just to show her he wasn't handing out a line, he showed her his roll.

After that things were even better between him and the blonde. She said she liked him much, much more than a lot. But he was so loaded and so sleepy, he had a hard time keeping his eyes open.

Funny thing, just about then Frankie thought he heard somebody knocking on the door. He figured maybe it was the dame in red. But before he could even try to find out he passed out.

When Frankie woke up, it was morning, full bright daylight. The blonde was gone. So was the dough; so was his new luggage, even. He found a dollar and thirty-five cents change in the back pocket of his suit. And that was it, brother, you've had it.

He'd had it, all right. Because before he could pull himself together, the house manager was on the phone complaining, telling him he was to vacate the premises at once on account of disturbing the neighbors during the night.

Frankie tried to say something about a refund then, remembering that a buck thirty-five was all that he had left, but the house manager said one more word and he'd call the cops. Besides, he didn't want an ex-con for a tenant.

Frankie's head was splitting; he couldn't figure out how the guy knew about *that*.

Not until he got downstairs and bought a paper and saw the story about the robbery, could he figure it. EX-CONVICT FOILS HOLDUP was the headline, and he read the story under it that was all about himself. *All* about himself, because some smart-aleck reporter must have checked the news files to see what he could find out about Frankie and ran across his name in an old story written at the time he got sent up.

So there was no sense going around to see Chesley for his job now. And the dough was gone, all on account of that dizzy, double-crossing blonde—

So it was gone. So what? That was just the breaks of the game. He could get more, with his luck.

With his luck.

But *she* was gone, too! And *she* was luck!

They must have thought Frankie was insane, when he ran back to the Ardmoor and yelled to the manager about a dame in red. The manager hadn't seen her, of course. Nobody had seen her. Nobody but Frankie.

He went back to the restaurant and to the old flop, went everywhere he'd been. Nobody talked.

What had the old Professor guy called her? Fortuna, the fickle goddess. Fickle. Only he'd been the one who was fickle. He'd ditched her for a blonde, thrown her out for a double-crossing thieving blonde.

Frankie went up and down the streets all day, looking for the dame in red. But he never saw her. His feet got tired and his head hurt and he kept talking to himself.

Finally, he decided to try the tavern. That's where he'd met her in the first place. She might be hanging around in the back room, where the Wheel of Fortune turned.

It was getting dark and Frankie was a wreck. What with his hangover, and all that walking, and the funny feeling inside of him—not knowing what was real any more—he could hardly see.

He was just about a block away from the joint, when he blinked and straightened up. Somebody was coming out of the front door and it looked like the dame in red.

Frankie started to run. The dame was walking away, fast, and this time he could hear the hard click of high heels. Now that he was closer, he could tell it wasn't the dame in red.

Then he saw who it was. It was the blonde—Margot! She'd been in there, playing the wheel on his dough!

She was walking away fast in the other direction and wasn't yet aware of him sprinting towards her. He caught up with her just alongside an alley, and that was good, too.

Now Frankie knew that even though he hadn't seen the dame in red that morning, she was still with him. Surely, she'd arranged for him to find Margot again. So luck was still in there pitching for him.

So he knew just what to do.

He reached out and grabbed the blonde by her pony-tail and

yanked her into the alley, fast. She turned around and saw him, her mouth dropping open and her eyes getting as big as they could get.

"Where's the dough!" Frankie shouted, yanking her head back and forth. "Where's my dough!"

The blonde couldn't answer, because he was shaking her so. But her bag fell out of her hand and landed on the bricks. It opened and a lot of lipstick and such spilled out of it. She pointed in the direction of the bag, gasping.

Frankie gave her one last angry shove. Then he got down on his knees and rummaged through the things that had fallen from her bag. He came up with a dollar or two in small change.

"You lost it!" Frankie yelled. "You lost it all! Talk about tough luck—"

Then he looked at her.

She was sitting on the alley pavement where she'd landed, sitting there with her back up against the wall. When Frankie had given her that shove, she'd banged her head, banged it hard, too, because there was blood running down the side of her face.

Frankie bent over and started to feel her forehead. But her head fell forward at his touch and Frankie could see right away that she was dead.

Frankie got out of the alley fast. He wanted to run, but there was no place to go. When they found the blonde, he knew that they'd trace her back to the hotel, identify her, and tie him in, sooner or later. And with the tough luck he was suddenly having, it might as well be sooner.

In Frankie's hand was the mound of loose change. Just enough to buy a couple of drinks, maybe. So he walked down the block, went into the tavern, and slid onto his regular stool.

The old Professor guy was there, and Frankie wanted to tell him the story. He wanted to tell him because maybe the Professor could settle something for him that was very important. Had there really been a dame in red, or had Frankie imagined the whole deal?

So Frankie started talking to the Professor real fast, spilling it all out. The Professor was pretty loaded, just like Frankie had been the night before, but he seemed to get the drift.

"Hallucination," he said. "It's all in your mind. Reality in such cases becomes purely subjective. But is there an objective world? That, my harried friend, is the question."

And then he set his glass back down on the bar and stared at the door to the back room.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Who's she beckoning to?"

"I don't see anybody," Frankie told him.

"Then she must be looking for me," the Professor said. He climbed down off the stool and staggered his way to the door. For a minute Frankie saw him standing there, moving his lips and gesturing, as if he were talking to someone. Then he nodded his head and held the door open for someone to go ahead of him into the back room and to its games of chance.

Frankie still couldn't see anyone, but then he remembered what the Professor had said about Fortune being a fickle goddess and all that. So maybe she had a new friend now, who maybe would treat her better. On the other hand, the Professor could have caught this hallucination business from him like you catch the measles or a cold in the chest. But maybe they were both crazy. Maybe the whole thing was just in their imaginations.

Maybe he'd even imagined murdering the blonde. By this time, Frankie didn't know just what to believe. Until all at once he could hear the sirens outside, and he knew that at least a part of it hadn't been his imagination.

The sirens got louder, and Frankie picked up his glass.

"Here's luck," said Frankie.

And then the cops walked in. ♫

Solution to the January/February "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Has-been

B. Electra

C. Nick of time

D. Rawhide

E. Yataghan

F. Aftermath

G. Lemonade

H. False

I. Obviously

J. Rhythm

K. De Sade

L. Tin ear

M. Release

N. Inhabited

O. Gemini

P. Gentle Ben

Q. Elephant

R. Rhinestone

S. Fuddy-duddy

T. Ignore

U. Salome

V. Hitchhike

QUOTATION

Author—HENRY ALFORD

Work—TRIGGERFISH (*The New York Times*—January 23, 2005)

"Consider the similarities between fish and hit men. They are both coldblooded. They have names like Hammerhead and Dead-Eye. . . . They are incapable of hugging. They are often killed in restaurants."

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Bryan Mullenix/Photodisc Green/Getty Images

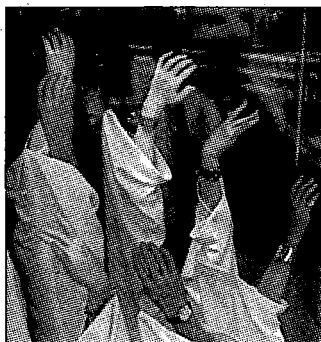
If a phone rings in the forest . . .

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Gil Stern of Las Vegas, Nevada. Honorable mentions go to Jacquie Juers of Wilmington, Delaware; Greg Jonas of Salt Lake City, Utah; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Pamela Karavolos of Rosamond, California; A. W. Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Scott Peeler of Jacksonville, Florida; Jean Nadzeika of Falmouth, Massachusetts; Ed Ridgley of Phenix City, Alabama; and William Moal of Modesto, California.



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TROUBLES BY THE HANDFUL

GIL STERN

“We’ve finally fingered you,” Sergeant Hanrohan said. “You run Helping Hands, a group of women who help those in need.

“That’s what we do,” the handsome gray-haired woman said, “see our handbills with our logo, all those hands reaching out to help.”

“You also have a ready hand to helping yourselves, too. Now we’ve got the upper hand on how your group hand picks items to steal from the homes they go into.”

She snickered, “You can’t palm off those robberies on me.”

“Yes, we thought we’d never lay hands on you but we had to do something before those robberies got way out of hand. We knuckled down and used two-fisted police work. We put an undercover woman in your group and she got hold of your handbook on stealing handicrafts and other handy collectibles that can glom you a fist full of dollars.”

“Undercover work is underhanded, it’ll never stand up in court, so hands off, copper,” she still snickered.

“We even have some notes in your handwriting, so it’s safe to say that we’ve caught you red handed.”

The sergeant slapped on the handcuffs. “Now what do you have to say?”

She knew the end was at hand. She saw that he held the winning hand. She knew she would be handed a prison term thanks to the long arm of the law.

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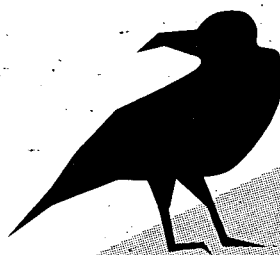
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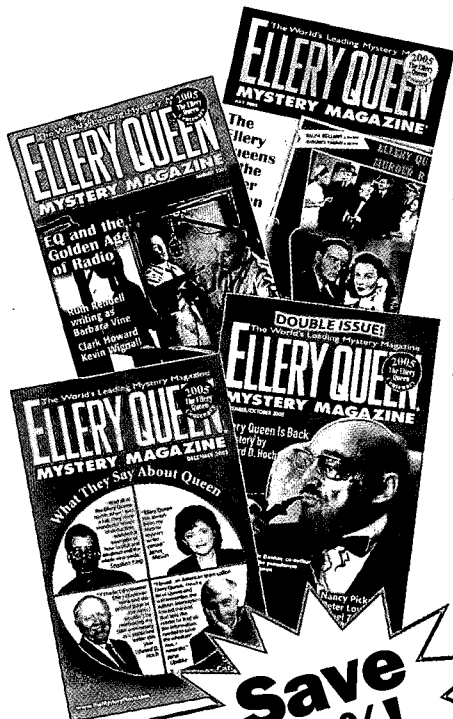
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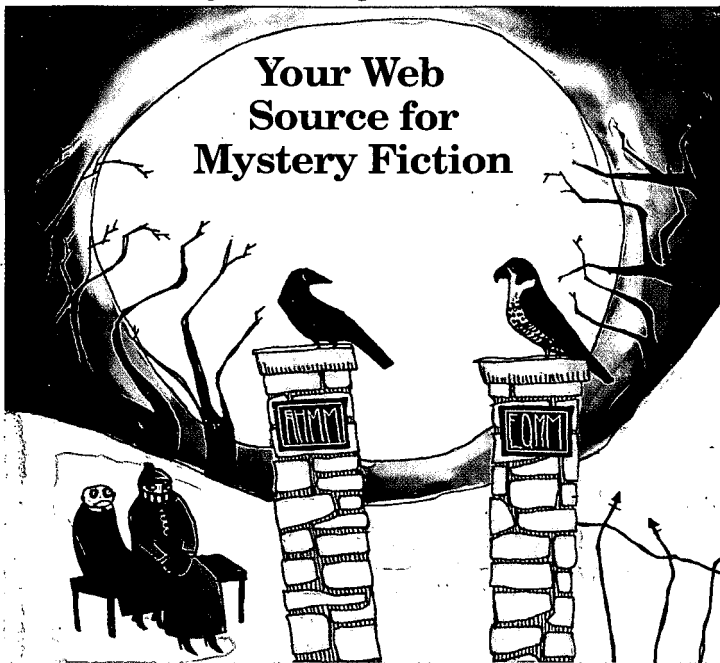
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